ABSTRACT

“THE EXTRAORDINARY FORCE AND SUCCESS OF INDIVIDUAL ENTERPRISE,” THE TRIUMPH OF LIBERALISM IN WISCONSIN, 1846-1860

by John Robert Herman

Using legislative debates and print media, this thesis explores how voters in Wisconsin interpreted and then fully embraced liberal ideology during the mid-nineteenth century. In the span of less than two years between 1854 and 1855, the Republican Party emerged from non-existence to become the dominant party in Wisconsin. Widespread antislavery sentiment in the electorate contributed to the success of the Republican Party. But an antislavery party with broad appeal only emerged after Wisconsinites possessed a unified self-perception as uniquely progressive in their economy and government. Wisconsinites saw themselves as freer, more progressive, and more virtuous than people anywhere else. In turn, they believed that anything that individuals did out of their own economic self-interest was not only acceptable, but also aided in fostering an ordered and virtuous society. The Republican Party in Wisconsin emerged as voters looked for a northern party to protect and promote liberal ideals.
“THE EXTRAORDINARY FORCE AND SUCCESS OF INDIVIDUAL ENTERPRISE,” THE TRIUMPH OF LIBERALISM IN WISCONSIN, 1846-1860

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

by

John Robert Herman

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2014

Advisor_______________________
Andrew R.L. Cayton

Reader_______________________
Amanda Kay McVety

Reader_______________________
Kathryn V. Burns-Howard
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 1 ......................................................................................................................... 17

CHAPTER 2 ......................................................................................................................... 31

CHAPTER 3 ......................................................................................................................... 44

CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................................... 58

APPENDIX ............................................................................................................................ 65

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................................................................... 69
Introduction

On a bitterly cold morning in Madison in January 1856, William Barstow was inaugurated for a second term as governor of Wisconsin. Barstow, a Democrat, had survived an incredibly close re-election campaign against Coles Bashford, a member of the upstart Republican Party. Third parties in Wisconsin, especially the Free-Soil Party, achieved some electoral success in congressional elections prior to the election of 1855. But Bashford’s win came in the first statewide election in which the Republican Party, formed just the year prior, competed as the primary opposition to the Democratic Party. With 72,553 total votes cast in the gubernatorial election, Barstow emerged victorious by just 157 votes.¹ Democrats seemingly held off the Republican surge, at least momentarily.

Any relief that Barstow felt from his victory in January of 1856 vanished quickly. Bashford disputed the election results, presenting his case to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Edward G. Ryan, Bashford’s attorney, challenged a number of questionable ballots that arrived in Madison after the official count. These late returns, some coming from non-existent precincts, were written on similar half-sheets of watermarked paper.² On March 24, the supreme court voted unanimously that Bashford had fraudulently won the gubernatorial election. Armed with the ruling, Barstow and Ryan took over the executive office. Despite minor protest from Democratic state legislators, Wisconsin’s first Republican governor officially took office in 1856.³

Bashford’s victory inaugurated nearly four decades of Republican Party dominance in Wisconsin politics. Between the first gubernatorial win in 1855 and the election of 1890, Republicans won all but one of the biennial elections for governor. The same was true for Wisconsin’s presidential elections. Wisconsinites gave the first Republican candidate for President, John C. Frémont, 56 percent of its general vote in 1856. Until Democrat Grover Cleveland’s victory in Wisconsin in 1892, Republicans

won at least 51 percent of the votes in all presidential elections.\footnote{Election results from Donoghue, *How Wisconsin Voted*. For a complete list of presidential and gubernatorial election results, see Appendix, I-II.} In the span of little more than a year, Republicans accomplished a rare feat in American politics; they created a new party capable of contesting general elections.

Although the creation of new popular parties in the United States is historically important at any time, historians devote particular attention to Republicans because of the implications that followed in the wake of their rise. Historians stress the role the rise of the party played in leading the United States towards Civil War.\footnote{Out of the vast scholarship connecting the rise of the Republican Party and the Civil War, some of the most important works are David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976); Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978); William E. Gienapp, *The Rise of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).} The Second Party System, in which Whigs and Democrats competed as the dominant parties between roughly 1824 and 1856, functioned by suppressing sectional conflict. Disputes over economic issues framed much of the political debate. The Republican Party, however, explicitly resisted further compromise with the South concerning the further spread of slavery into new territory. By 1860, “the revolution was completed,” as Republicans won full control of the federal government despite making “no attempt to win southern support or even to make itself understood in the South.”\footnote{Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 446.} The secession of some southern states quickly followed electoral success for Republicans. Although historians continue to debate the causes of the Civil War,\footnote{Marc Egnal, for example, argues that diverging economic interests between North and South were the primary cause of the Civil War in *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2009).} the dissolution of the Second Party System in the 1850s stands as a pivotal point at which the strength of unity between North and South broke down.

The dissolution of the Second Party System thus stands as an important political marker because of the rarity of party re-alignment, as well as an important development in the dominant event in the nineteenth century United States, the Civil War. As one of the first states where Republicans achieved electoral success, Wisconsin is a useful place to examine why northerners abandoned the Democratic and Whig Parties in favor of the
Republican Party. One interpretation is that a general antislavery sentiment among the voters of the state allowed Republicans to craft a new party dedicated to ending slavery. Michael McManus argues that throughout the pre-Civil War period, “what stands out most is the endurance of Liberty party principles as Free Soilers and their Republican successors adopted them.”\(^8\) McManus is buoyed by the fact that within Wisconsin, most citizens in the 1850s deplored slavery. Feeling threatened by the perceived encroachment of slavery on the North, some joined the Republican ranks believing they were finally taking a stand against the “slave power.” As one writer to the \textit{Milwaukee Daily American} foreshadowed in 1856, “the war is inevitable, and I for one say let it come.”\(^9\) Although writing about Kansas, and not a national civil war, the writer’s sentiments were clear; from this point on he would shed blood to resist the South and slavery.

Hatred for slavery only partly explains Republican successes in Wisconsin in the 1850s, however. Going to war to fight the expansion of slavery may have been a viable course of action for the writer to the \textit{Daily American}, but many in Wisconsin did not see the war as either desirable or “inevitable.” The enslavement of African Americans was a distant problem. Of more immediate concern was maintaining Wisconsin on an abstract course of what they called progress. Between the late 1840s and 1850s, how Wisconsin’s citizens defined progress underwent a gradual transformation. During the Second Party System, Democrats nationally largely resisted new mechanisms for economic growth like banks, internal improvements, and corporations, as tools that enabled a small class of citizens to rule politically and socially. In addition to being unresponsive to the public, banks and railroad corporations threatened the localism and agriculturalism that were supposed to keep men virtuous in both public and private. As the dominant political party during the territorial period, which lasted from 1836-1848, Democratic rhetoric framed the political dialogue.

However, Democratic hegemony started to erode as some within the party began to alter their vision of ideal economic conditions. Essentially, a majority of Wisconsinites by the 1850s believed that railroads, banks, and any other products of private enterprise

\(^8\) Michael J. McManus, \textit{Political Abolitionism in Wisconsin, 1840-1861} (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1998), X.

\(^9\) \textit{Milwaukee Daily American}, 3 September, 1856.
in an emerging industrial economy were safe in a free society. In opposition to their national party, many Wisconsin Democrats believed that economic progress, rather than a beneficial side effect of political equality that would emerge slowly and naturally, was a necessary condition for it. They envisioned a future Wisconsin crisscrossed by railroads and canals and dotted with banks as the center of Western commerce in the United States. Mechanisms for complex economic growth were no longer forms of corruption and vice, but helped create morally progressive individual citizens. Whereas previously it was agricultural production that fostered a virtuous citizenry, mid-century Wisconsinites believed that they were already virtuous. As long as artificial inequalities were not imposed upon “the people” through public intrusion into the private marketplace, they thought, “the people” would remain virtuous. Liberalism, or the belief that individual citizens acting in their own self-interest fostered an ordered society, dominated economic and political thought.

Thus the importance of the rise of the Republican Party extends more broadly than the end of slavery and the Civil War. An antislavery party with broad appeal in the state only emerged after economic issues did not define the differences between major political parties. Even then, the threat was not slavery in the states where it already existed, but rather the threat that slaveholders posed to people within free states. If slaveholders were allowed to control the federal government, Republicans feared, they could impose an anti-progressive agenda. That not only meant the possibility of slavery existing within the borders of the state, but also an economy dominated by aristocracy. Possessing what by the mid-1850s was a unified self-perception as uniquely progressive in their economy and government, Wisconsinites viewed themselves in relation to a supposedly backwards South. Bashford and the Republican Party were not successful solely because Wisconsinites were threatened by slavery, they won because by 1855 Wisconsinites believed that Republicans were the progressive party that represented their interests more than the existing parties. By then, Wisconsinites saw themselves as more free, more equal, more progressive, and more American than the South, and the Republican Party was the vehicle for ensuring their vision for the future won out.
The two-party political system that existed before the rise of the Republican Party is generally treated as a separate entity from the sectional debates over slavery of the 1850s. Known as the “Jacksonian era,” the period was marked by political conflict regarding the practical implications and unintended consequences of men acting out of self-interest. The difference between the two major parties rested in how they believed public order was maintained in a nation of free individuals. Whigs set forth an agenda for assuring progress through government action, supporting internal improvements, banking, education, and morality schemes. Democrats, on the other hand, resisted these plans as government favoritism; the best way to ensure a vibrant and democratically progressive population was to remove all artificial distinctions between citizens. Rapid transformation of economic life in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century made these issues immediately important. Advancements in transportation, communication, and commercial techniques were shattering localized notions of space and time and integrating Americans across the continent. Many contemporaries, according to Harry Watson, thought these changes “brought greater opportunities to the average citizen and a greater degree of economic and political equality to the nation as a whole.” Yet Democrats’ uncertainty in a period of rapid economic expansion and integration between the 1820s and 1840s created conflict with Whigs more readily willing to propel the national economy through active government involvement. Ultimately the Second Party System was a debate, as Daniel Walker Howe argues, about whether the United States “should remain primarily agricultural, with manufactured products imported, or should economic diversification and development be encouraged along with economic growth?”

---


Democrats were concerned particularly with the effects that a complex market had on a democratic populace, worrying that wealth through unproductive work would cause citizens to place private interests above public concerns. Lauding the production of wealth through physical labor rather than impersonal commerce, Watson argues that Jacksonian Democrats “remained hostile to the social and political implications of paper wealth, machine technology, and large-scale production.”13 Advanced technology and credit fostered an economy of impersonal market relationships and allowed some men to acquire wealth beyond what they could produce individually. Lawrence Kohl argues that Democrats felt uncertain in the new world created by impersonal markets, and attempted to “protect more traditional relationships from the transforming effects of modernity.”14 Feeling powerless to the influences of the “persuasive and powerful” modern institutions that arbitrarily shaped their reality, Democrats attacked sources of instability they saw, mainly the U.S. Bank.15

Ever mindful of any forms of concentrated power, Jacksonian Democrats saw in banking the possibility of corruption and unnatural hierarchy.16 The Second U.S. Bank, then, had to be killed to ensure the progress of equality and democracy. Kohl argues that Democrats saw the bank, along with the Whig “American System,” as devised “solely with an eye to extracting wealth from the producing classes and to giving it to those who did not work.”17 Even if the bank were a sound financial institution, the possibility of personal political corruption among the bank’s unelected supervisors was too dangerous. For Democrats, an unresponsive monopoly was a direct threat to the public virtue they sought to protect.

The virtue of the individual citizen was so important for Wisconsinites, and Americans in general, because they believed that individual morality made a republican

13 Watson, Liberty and Power, 133. Constitutional debates about the market revolution are covered in Tony A. Freyer, Producers Versus Capitalists: Constitutional Conflict in Antebellum America (Charlottesville; University Press of Virginia, 1994).
17 Kohl, The Politics of Individualism, 50.
system of government possible. Americans thought that for a society of free individuals to maintain order, virtue needed to check man’s “natural” desire to accumulate power over his fellow man. The nineteenth century conception of virtue had evolved from older versions of civic virtue, or what Joyce Appleby describes as “the capacity of some men to rise above private interests and devote themselves to the public good.” Under the direction of Jeffersonians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, virtue was democratized, becoming an individual trait that all citizens should acquire in their private affairs. Harry Watson argues that the concept of “virtue” was meant to “preserve the precarious balance between liberty and power” in American society. Because nineteenth century Americans saw themselves as enjoying greater individual liberty than any other people in the world’s history, they knew that virtue needed to serve, in Watson’s words, “as the moral cement of republican society.” Therefore when Democrats and Whigs debated economic policies like re-chartering the U.S. Bank in the 1830s, they were not only concerned with what would lead to the most economic success for themselves or even the nation. Rather, they were concerned with how to maintain a stable and functioning society composed of free individual citizens. Whigs trusted “that their individual striving ultimately benefitted the community,” leading them to support government actions that promoted individual opportunity in the market. If the market revolution threatened to create a citizenry that placed private gain above public interest, as Democrats thought it did, then the entire concept of a free society functioning harmoniously was in jeopardy.

In 1836, Wisconsin was incorporated as a territory in the midst of the Jacksonian political debates. However, many of the earliest settlers in the 1830s and 1840s had little interest in the Whig conception of progress. Early settlement clustered in the lead-rich

---

areas of the southwestern part of present-day Wisconsin. With the Mississippi River providing a ready connection to markets, lead miners had little reason to support internal improvement schemes. Low in capital and resistant to any attempt by the federal government to control the distribution of the mineral lands, southwestern miners and farmers made Wisconsin strongly Democratic between 1836 and 1847. However, by the time Wisconsin became a state in 1848, a demographic explosion was transforming the electorate.

In 1840, four years after being incorporated as a territory, Wisconsin’s population was 30,749. Just a decade later, the population had increased nearly ten times, to 304,756. The population more than doubled between 1850 and 1860, reaching 775,881 on the eve of the Civil War. The incredible population growth transformed the political landscape as well. As emerging port cities along Lake Michigan grew rapidly, they quickly surpassed the lead mining regions of the southwest in political clout. Milwaukee, a small village of 1,712 in 1840, by 1860 had a population of 45,246. Like Racine, Kenosha, and Sheboygan, Milwaukee served as an outlet for the wheat Wisconsin farmers cultivated in the fertile southern half of the state. Wisconsin’s newcomers knew that to compete in the Great Lakes economy, they needed improved transportation and commercial infrastructure, i.e. railroads, canals and banks. For Jacksonian Democrats, the population influx posed a dire problem.

Although population growth threatened the Democratic Party’s dominance, it did not bode particularly well for Whigs. Wisconsin’s population growth was driven in large part due to immigration from Europe. In 1850, Wisconsin’s population consisted of roughly three equal parts. One third were born in New England and Middle Atlantic states, and one third in Wisconsin or other Great Lakes states. The final third were

---


foreign-born, primarily from Great Britain, Ireland, German states, and Scandinavia.\textsuperscript{25} The high population of immigrant citizens in Wisconsin, along with their tendency to vote in blocs, meant they held an important place in state politics. Because the Whigs carried the stigma of being anti-immigrant, the party struggled to gain from Democratic losses. The anti-immigrant perception was warranted in some cases: Whigs did support long residency requirements for citizenship unpopular with immigrants, for example. But it was also a stigma that the Whigs could not shake even when trying to reach out to immigrant voters.

By the early 1850s then, both Whigs and Democrats were struggling to maintain their status as major parties in Wisconsin. Third Party movements enjoyed brief successes in the state, but none attracted a significant enough portion of the electorate to be competitive statewide. In the state’s first congressional election in 1848, Wisconsin elected a Free Soil candidate to the U.S. House. However, the party was hampered in Wisconsin by the Jacksonian economic policy set forth by the party’s eastern membership. Although unable to immediately undo the two-party dominance, third parties did force Whigs and Democrats in Wisconsin to adapt. Whigs temporarily abandoned temperance and high residency requirements for citizenship in an effort to attract immigrant voters. Democrats on the other hand opposed the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, in an effort to attract antislavery voters. The result was that both parties appeared unprincipled and unrepresentative of the state’s constituency by the 1850s.\textsuperscript{26} With the credibility of both major parties challenged, conditions were ripe for a new issue to animate political organization.

Michael Holt’s \textit{The Political Crisis of the 1850s} outlines how the convergence of Whig and Democratic platforms led to the collapse of the Second Party System. Consensus between the two parties, rather than conflict, initiated the collapse. Holt argues that because “the political system’s vitality and legitimacy with the voters depended on the clarity of the definition of the parties as opponents, the blurring of that definition undid the system.”\textsuperscript{27} The congruence of the two parties at the national level on

\textsuperscript{26} Current, \textit{The History of Wisconsin}, 217.
economic issues prompted Americans to look for alternatives in order to carry out their political aims. This situation resulted in intense sectional conflict, as “each section began to view the other as the subverter of republicanism, as a lawless and usurping tyrant bent on perverting the traditional basis of society and government.”

Recent historical scholarship regarding the end of the Second Party System elaborates on Holt’s thesis to show how a host of issues and movements, including free soil, expansionism, nativism, temperance, and anti-party sentiment undermined the Second Party System. Tyler Anbinder explores the connection between nativist politics and a growing distrust of political parties around the mid-nineteenth century. Anbinder argues that nativist sentiment, especially anti-Catholicism, existed in the United States before the 1850s, but weakness in the Whig party allowed Know-Nothings to emerge as a nationally important party. More than simply anti-immigrant, Know-Nothings were motivated by anti-party sentiment, believing that “modern politicians lacked the commitment to ‘virtue’ and ‘the public good.’” Whether it was recruiting “papal” immigrants or the willingness to use government to reward friends and hurt enemies, nativists believed government officials were corrupting a society based on political and economic equality. As Mark Summers points out, there was some truth to the belief that political officials were not governing with the best interests of the public in mind.

“Contemporaries were right to think that public ethics had fallen badly,” Summers argues in *The Plundering Generation*, as reports of corruption in public officials rose sharply in the 1850s. Sensing a “moral decay” throughout the nation, Americans “chose to smash the parties and perhaps the Union itself to revive the principles they associated with the founders of the nation.”

If the end of the Second Party System is viewed as a contingent event, James Polk’s presidency is the point when sectionalism emerged as a divisive political issue nationally. During Polk’s single term, from 1845 to 1849, the United States acquired a

---

31 Summers, *The Plundering Generation*, XV.
huge amount of territory, which the federal government needed to organize politically. During the congressional debate over a funding bill for the Mexican - American War in 1847, Democrat David Wilmot of Pennsylvania proposed restricting slavery from all territories gained from Mexico. David Potter notes the sharp sectional divide in Congress over the Wilmot Proviso, which “produced a division not between Whigs and Democrats, but between northerners and southerners.” With the question of how to organize the vast new territories acquired in the West, political debate between 1844 and 1854 deteriorated into sectional conflict. Jonathan Earle argues that “the events of the 1840s – Texas annexation, the Mexican War, and the Wilmot Proviso,” led northern Democrats to believe “their party was increasingly dominated by southerners.” In response to increased northern unity, southerners developed a rhetorical image of themselves as an oppressed minority. Elizabeth Varon argues that Southern leaders had “to retool the South’s image as a beleaguered minority,” and paint pro-Wilmot politicians as conspiring to “rob the South of its rights.” Sectional tensions over slavery existed long before the 1840s, but historians emphasize the contingent events that made those tensions manifest politically.

Michael Morrison takes issue with the concept of the Wilmot Proviso and Polk’s presidency more broadly as the catalyst for sectional issues to surface. Morrison argues that historians “have infused an air of inevitability into the sectional struggle over slavery restriction, claiming that it widened an existing and immutable rift between the North and South.” By claiming that slavery defined southern politics, the historiography “casts northerners as irrational extremists and southerners as adversaries both of the Union and

of the fundamental premises of the Democracy.”

Morrison argues that territorial expansion remained the most important factor in political conflict, as Democrats saw the addition of Texas as “the single most important prerequisite of republican freedom.”

Sectional conflict emerged from territorial acquisition as Americans debated a “momentous question,” regarding whether the “institutions of the West, and for that matter future acquisitions,” would resemble the North or the South.

By emphasizing the importance of land, and not the exclusion of slavery, Morrison subtly illustrates an important point about the northern political mind before the Civil War. Northerners did believe slavery was an immoral institution, but the negative effects that slavery had on white Americans concerned northerners more than slavery’s effect on African Americans. The status of former slaves in the United States if slavery ended posed a vexing problem for northerners that believed in political equality for all citizens, but who simultaneously possessed a limited conception of who could properly exercise citizenship. In Wisconsin, this question played out over a series of referendums between 1849 and 1865 in which suffrage for African Americans was put to vote. In those three referendums, Wisconsin’s voters were divided between ambivalence and hostility. The first vote in 1849 passed, 5,265 to 4,075, but because so few people decided to cast a ballot either for or against, the measure was thrown out. Two other referendums, one in 1857 and another in 1865, both failed by wide margins. Only after the Wisconsin Supreme Court decided in 1866 to honor the 1849 vote did African Americans gain the right to vote in Wisconsin.

The Republican Party achieved some of its earliest successes in Wisconsin, but concern for racial equality was far from the front of many voters’ minds. The emphasis historians of the Second Party System place on economic issues, contrasting with the emphasis historians of the 1850s place, creates a bifurcated narrative of the period between roughly the mid-1820s and the Civil War. It is as if Americans

---

36 Morrison, Slavery and the American West, 42.
37 Morrison, Slavery and the American West, 17. For more on the West as a symbol of republican progress, see Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).
38 Morrison, Slavery and the American West, 6.
were deeply divided because of the rapid economic changes taking place between 1820 and 1845, but then suddenly those divides healed and slavery became a more important issue, at least in the north. This essay attempts to bridge the gap between the two historiographies to illustrate the continuities, as well as the changes, that took place in American perceptions of their government. Between the late 1840s and the start of the Civil War, Wisconsinites did converge on their ideas about the market, creating political space for slavery to emerge as a serious issue. But how that process happened is important. Railroads, banks, internal improvements, and corporations were not only grudgingly tolerated, they were embraced for the moral good that they imparted on society. In the process of this transformation, Wisconsinites came to see themselves as superior to southerners. Slavery was just one part of a body of the backward, anti-progressive, and aristocratic South that northerners perceived.

Because southerners were not only a threat to their section, but to the nation as a whole, people in Wisconsin were willing to fight a war to combat what they saw as southern aggression. In the process of that war and its aftermath a system of labor sanctioned in British North America and then the United States for over 250 years was ended. In the process, domination of the federal government by the Republican Party enshrined a liberal capitalist economy in American society. After decades of political conflict regarding what the political economy of the United States should look like, Republicans succeeded electorally by embracing a complex market economy.

**Organization**

The first two chapters explore how the Second Party System weakened in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Before a large portion of Wisconsin’s electorate supported a sectional party, two important transformations took place. First, whether Whig, Democrat, or other, a voter had to believe that his party no longer represented his best interests or the interests of the society as a whole. Jacksonian era voters tended to be loyal to their parties, therefore major disruptions in voting behavior resulted from serious distrust of the party. Second, that voter had to believe that another party actually represented his interests more effectively.⁴⁰ During the first constitutional convention in

---

Wisconsin in 1846, covered in Chapter 1, the Democratic Party in Wisconsin began showing signs of weakness. On economic issues, especially banking, the party divided over whether to follow the national party’s lead, or to follow a course of liberalized banking and internal improvement laws. Problems for Jacksonian Democrats were only exacerbated after Wisconsin became a state in 1848. Embedded within the rhetoric of the pro-development Democrats are signs of weakness within the party. These Democrats no longer believed that their interests were best represented by the continuation of Jacksonian political economy, thus threatening the strength of the party.

Chapter 2 covers how the perception of railroads, banks, and economic progress more generally changed around mid-century. During the territorial period, many in Wisconsin believed that corporations, primarily in the form of railroad companies, were threats to a society that valued its freedom and equality because they provoked men to value the acquisition of profit over the public good. But by the mid-1850s, railroads were no more dangerous to the public good than a steel plow. In the imaginations of pro-development Wisconsinites, railroads became simply tools that all free men could take advantage of. In the process of this transformation, Wisconsinites believed that because they were already virtuous, they did not have to worry about the corrupting effects of acquired wealth. Any private gains, and any activity employed to acquire wealth, were beneficial to the public at large. As Marc Egnal points out, the Morrill Act, the Homestead Act, and the Transcontinental Railroad are important legacies of the Republican Party in the 1860s that are often overlooked. But these specific economic initiatives, along with a general faith in the positive effects of the market, are vital to the development of the American political economy of the nineteenth century. Whereas the first half of the nineteenth century saw intense debate about the compatibility of capitalism and republicanism, mid-century Americans in the North embraced a complex market economy. This transformation meant that the enduring legacy of the Republican Party included the embracing of capitalism in the United States.

The final chapter explores how Wisconsinites began to define themselves in opposition to the South, and how that led to Republican dominance in the state. Wisconsin’s population was never supportive of slavery. But sectional tension was

---

subdued by the national two-party system before the late 1840s. When the state parties began to converge on their economic and social platforms, loyalty to the national parties eroded and sectional tension emerged. Republicans believed that slavery not only hurt American institutions in the South, but also threatened republicanism in the North, and in turn the future of the United States as a nation of free white men. The Republican Party capitalized on the large body of voters discontented with the existing parties by defining themselves against the South. By being the abstract party of both economic and social progress, Republicans attracted farmers, businessmen, nativists, immigrants, free-soilers, temperance advocates, and abolitionists, all under one name.

Newspapers comprise the bulk of the primary evidence used to investigate the political culture in Wisconsin. Richard John argues that “the press,” consisting of newspapers, magazines and public documents, “was the principal mass medium,” for early nineteenth century Americans.\(^{42}\) Newspaper material was not confined to political dialogue, as Wisconsin’s papers discussed social problems, news from abroad, travel diaries, and tips for improving the function of the home, among other things. Immigrants also ran separate foreign-language presses catering to the large foreign-born population.\(^{43}\) Although by law only white males could participate in politics, newspapers allowed everyone to consume and interpret society. According to John, newspapers created a “national community that extended to every citizen living within its boundaries an invitation to participate in public affairs.”\(^{44}\)

As with any body of primary sources, newspapers present a unique challenge. The overt partisanship of the press in nineteenth century Wisconsin means that very little information in newspapers is reliable as a source of fact. However, newspapers offer the reader an opportunity to capture what issues mattered to people and why. In essence, they offer a window into the political culture that readers and writers inhabited. Newspapers worked as a sort of middle ground between political elites and voters. On one hand, they

---


\(^{44}\) John, *Spreading the News*, 56.
show how newspaper editors, and the people that had access to the editors, sought to connect with the general population. On the other hand, how these elites tried to communicate with the general population displays how it is that readers interpreted political news. “To stay in business and prosper,” as Lorman Ratner and Dwight Teeter argue, “editors had to remain generally attuned to words and ideas that would attract the readers.”45 While it is impossible to know whether one type of message was more effective than another, the repetition of themes shows that the electorate in Wisconsin had a certain set of concerns that correlated to the reshaping of the party system. In the political dialogue of the mid-nineteenth century Wisconsin, progress, morality, and virtue were the issues that framed debates among the citizenry.

CHAPTER I

On October 5, 1846, delegates from throughout the Wisconsin Territory gathered in Madison to draft a state constitution. Over the next two months, these delegates debated, deliberated and compromised, eventually producing a constitution to present to the voters of the territory for their approval. The range of issues at stake for the convention’s delegates, from internal improvements to banking to women’s property rights, covered the gamut of political struggles in the mid-nineteenth-century United States over the proper scale and scope of government. Far from an exercise in simply following examples of established state constitutions, the convention was bitterly contested by the delegates. The most contentious of the debates involved the economic future of the state, a subject which fostered sharp disagreements over what role the state government should play in promoting both individual freedom and equality of opportunity. Although the Democratic Party numerically dominated the convention’s ranks, the debates illustrate the difficulty the existing party structure was having in achieving consensus on economic issues near the end of the Second Party System. By the end of the convention, the Democratic Party was at much at war with itself as it was with the Whig Party. On the most contested issue of the convention, banking, the party’s delegates failed to unify, destabilizing the political structure of the state.

Voters in Wisconsin solidly rejected the first convention’s constitution, by a margin of 20,333 to 14,119.46 Historians of mid-nineteenth century Wisconsin have given little serious attention to the first convention, traditionally attributing its failure to the political inexperience of the delegates. Mark Wyman only briefly mentions the first convention, other than to remark that the debates were “marked by shouting and bombast.”47 Robert Nesbit, who more thoroughly explores the debates, attributes the failure of the first convention to its anti-banking provisions. Nesbit does explore the divisions within the Democratic Party, but argues that “it was generally agreed that the

bank article had been the real nemesis of the constitution.”48 Ultimately, historians have dismissed Wisconsin’s first constitutional convention as the product of a dying Jacksonian era. In this narrative, as the territory, and the nation more broadly, moved forward with dynamic economic development, political resistance to banks, internal improvements, and other mechanisms for establishing a modern industrial economy was no longer viable. With politically naïve Democratic delegates advancing policies from a bygone era, the first constitution was an inevitable failure.49

It is clear that the delegates to the first convention were largely political amateurs and that the complete prohibition on banking was a political misstep, yet the debates of the first convention should not be disregarded. On one level, the conflict on the floor of the first convention illustrates the contested nature of political parties in mid-nineteenth century America. For the delegates, there was little consensus on whether partisan identification should be simply a tool for nominally sorting like-minded politicians, or a symbol of attachment to a rigid set of ideologies. Henry Baird, a Whig delegate from Green Bay, believed party politics and platforms should be absent from the convention. His intention was not the advancement of Whig principles, but to “promote the interest of [his] constituents and do the business of the country.”50 According to Baird, acting as a disinterested statesmen with the best long-term interests of the state in mind was much more important than adhering to partisan principles. Edward Ryan, a Democrat from Racine, challenged Baird’s assumptions about the role of the delegates in the convention. Believing he had been elected because of his partisan identification, Ryan asserted that he “belonged to the great Democratic family,” and that he came to the convention to “carry out the measures of that party.”51 The limited development of party structures in a growing territory is partially to blame for confusion about the role of partisanship in the convention. But the exchange between Baird and Ryan also indicates a more widespread

49 Michael Holt points out how historians fail to explain why the 2nd Party System collapsed nationally by “skipping over periods between slavery-related events and ignoring other developments in the those same years. Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 102).
conflict over the role of political parties in a democratic government. Should representatives be responsive to only their supporters and their party, or was it their duty to represent the best interests of their constituency as a whole? Although they did not frame the debate in these terms, Baird and Ryan were part of an ongoing conflict over how public opinion should manifest itself in a representative system.

In addition to illustrating the conflict over how representatives should govern, the first constitutional convention highlights how Democratic Party hegemony in Wisconsin broke down over economic issues. The central issues of the convention, banking, internal improvements and the state’s role in chartering corporations, all raised fundamental questions in the American political imagination - could individuals with personal liberty be trusted not to infringe upon the liberties of others? And if they could not, what should be done to ensure the maximum degree of individual liberty without imposing a hierarchical social and political order? The failure of the constitution in front of the state’s electorate left the state without political solutions to these issues. The significance of the first constitutional convention lies in how its debates weakened the Democratic Party in Wisconsin. Failure to reach consensus by delegates within the party on economic issues weakened party loyalty and left it without direction. The end of the Second Party System was still several years away, but the first political manifestations of its demise took shape in Madison in 1846.

Comprising one side of the debate within the Democratic Party, Jacksonian Democratic delegates, or “hards” believed that citizens had to give up individual freedom, the ability to bank, for example, in order to protect political equality and social order. So named because of their advocacy of the use of hard currency, or specie, the “hards” hoped to encode into the constitution the abstract principles of anti-monopoly, limited government, and majority rule that the national party espoused. Anti-monopoly and anti-corruption rhetoric, along with the specific policies that followed from these principles, had served the Democratic Party well on the national level since 1828, and in the Wisconsin Territory since 1836. By prohibiting banking, limiting the use of paper currency, and avoiding government debts for internal improvements, “hards” saw themselves as protecting the “common man” from self-interested, immoral individuals whose only concern was private wealth. Awarding bank charters, for example, was an
unnecessary government function that allowed people with connections to legislatures to gain a competitive advantage in the market. The *Milwaukee Courier* argued that anti-bank policies were designed “to protect the weak against the machinations of the powerful.”  

Without these protections, “the honest unsophisticated producer,” according to the paper, was at the mercy of the “cunning, overreaching and all grasping avarice of the few.” The anti-bank, anti-internal improvement economic policies of the “hard” Democrats were meant to destroy the unnatural inequalities of opportunity that came from government favoritism, not to arrest economic development completely. Mistakenly believing they were acting with the support of a majority of the constituency, these “hard” Democrats pushed through the provisions in the constitution completely outlawing banks and prohibiting the state from supporting internal improvements. In other words, they hoped to make Wisconsin’s Constitution a codification of Jacksonian principles.

At the center of the debate on banking in the Convention of 1846 was the chair of the Committee on Banks and Banking, Democrat Edward G. Ryan. Like most of the delegates to the first convention and many in the Wisconsin territory more generally, Ryan was not originally from Wisconsin. Having emigrated from Ireland to New York as a teenager, Ryan was an ambitious and politically active lawyer. By the time he left New York for Chicago in 1836, Ryan’s conception of banks as “artificial political creations fathered by chicanery and mothered by favoritism” had firmly taken hold, and would guide his political career.  

The Panic of 1837, along with his experiences as a practicing lawyer, further entrenched in Ryan a distrust of paper money and corporations, and more importantly for the convention of 1846, strengthened his distrust of legislatures to act in the best interests of the people. In 1839, Ryan joined several other Chicago attorneys in an attempt to impeach John Pearson, a circuit judge described by one historian as “an incompetent party hack who had been appointed by a spoils-minded Democratic legislature.”  

The failure of the Illinois Legislature to punish Pearson infuriated Ryan, instilling in him a distrust of legislators that he carried to Wisconsin. Ryan left Chicago

---

52 *Milwaukee Courier*, May 5, 1847.
53 *Milwaukee Courier*, May 5, 1847.
for Racine, Wisconsin in 1842, where he continued practicing law and quickly became an important political figure in the territory’s Democratic Party.

A week into the convention, Ryan presented his plan for the banking section of the constitution to the assembled delegates. Ryan drafted the report in secret the night before, got the consent of a majority, but not all, of the members of the Committee on Banks and Banking, and presented it as the committee’s final report the next day. Not only would Ryan’s report explicitly prohibit the establishment of banks and the exchange of paper currency in the state, it also enumerated specific penalties for violation of the restrictions. Moses Gibson, a Whig delegate and member of the banking committee, immediately objected to not only Ryan’s political maneuvering, but also the content of the report. Gibson asserted that he “knew nothing of the meeting” in which the report was crafted, and that he took exception to “every line, word, and letter contained in it.”

William Rudolph Smith added to the opposition, arguing that “to enact a penal code was the legitimate business of a legislature and not of a convention.” Ryan likely understood that his ideas on banking would incite controversy, but his attempt to force the measure into the constitution without debate heightened opposition and ensured that banking was the central issue of the convention.

In his defense of the report, Ryan refused to moderate his anti-bank stance. He saw the report as a legitimate effort to “restrict and restrain legislators, as well as to protect the citizen,” and that any time “you would limit the legislature, you place the provision in the constitution.” Demonstrating his fear of political corruption, Ryan argued that without explicit penalties and restrictions encoded in the constitution, “softs,” or men wanting the circulation of paper currency and banking, would manipulate legislators to allow banking in the future. Eventually, Ryan believed, “lobby monopolists and bank men” would “haunt” the capital session by session until penalties were so innocuous that they could not discourage banking. Ultimately, Ryan assumed

that if banks depended on political action to exist, corruption would naturally take over legislatures.

In the context of the rapid transformation of the economy of the United States at mid-century, Ryan and the “hards” seem anti-progressive on the surface. It is clear that the United States was undergoing incredible economic change fueled by advances in transportation and communication, and ultimately, the use of credit financing, advances which make the rise of capitalism in the United States seem inevitable. Alfons Beitzinger, a Ryan biographer, argues that Ryan’s conception of a “simple, stable Arcadian society” was, even by 1846, becoming more and more obsolete with the commercial and technological developments of each passing day. But Ryan’s vision did not exist in a vacuum. Although he was willing to go to more extreme measures than the Wisconsin electorate, as evidenced by their rejection of the first constitution, the principles underlying Ryan’s stance were not as abnormal as his method for carrying them out. Many in Wisconsin, and in the United States more broadly, were not ready to concede that credit and banking were necessary to a functioning society. Jacksonian rhetoric was appealing not only because specific institutions like the United States Bank elicited distrust and unease, but also because many Americans feared new forms of aristocracy emerging out of the ability of a small part of the citizenry manipulating capital.

Economic policies mattered because the delegates believed that their actions influenced the tenuous balance between liberty and equality. “Hards” saw the need to sacrifice a small portion of liberty, in this case the freedom of future legislatures to establish banking, in order to protect equality. They believed banking and internal improvements were so threatening, and so sure to cause corruption among citizens and government officials, that they had to be permanently prohibited. “Tadpoles,” on the other hand, were developing a conceptualization of the citizenry that would be crucial in the destabilization of the Second Party System in Wisconsin. Wisconsin’s citizens, they argued, were already virtuous and equal, and the threat that they faced was not banks, but a government that restricted their liberty. Supportive of hard currency, the Racine Advocate expressed that it despised banks “with a tolerably bitter hatred.” Yet the threat of banks was not as great as the threat of restricting liberty by outlawing banks. When

---

considering laws, the paper urged people “to ask whether there is in it anything that
restricts a man in the exercise of his natural rights, or anything that favors a set of men, or
a man, improperly.” If this were the case, “the law is wrong.”

“Tadpoles” employed this rhetoric to make economic policies secondary. They were concerned not with challenging market capitalism, but ensuring that government did nothing that hindered citizens from exercising their natural rights.

Resisting the push to make Jacksonian economic policies permanent, a number of Democrats sought to craft a pragmatic constitution that would allow future state legislators and voters to decide the fate of banking and internal improvements. Derided by “hard” Democrats as “tadpoles” or “softs,” this group resisted constitutional restrictions, arguing that if Wisconsin wanted to be economically competitive with other western states, the people might find banks necessary. “Tadpoles” believed that if Wisconsin’s citizens wanted to allow banks to exist in the state in the future, it should be up to each generation to decide the matter for itself. Banks may be dangerous now, but there may be a time and manner by which they could become safe in the future. If banks ever became beneficial, “tadpoles” wanted “those benefits as promiscuously conferred as the nature of the thing will allow.”

Sensing that anti-bank sentiment was eroding in Wisconsin, “tadpoles” placed their faith in the electorate to settle the bank question. By deferring to popular will, they maintained their loyalty to the party without condemning banking outright, and thus completely abandoning the Democratic Party.

In attempting to temper Ryan’s radicalism, a number of Democrats in the convention put forth a vision for Wisconsin’s economic future that upheld republican principles while allowing for the possibility that banking could exist in the future. Rather than debate Ryan on the merits of banking, the “soft” Democrats attacked what they saw as excessive legislative business in the constitutional convention. They objected to the

62 The Racine Advocate, June 2, 1846.
63 The Racine Advocate, March 12, 1851.
64 Wide support for banking in the 1851 and 1852 referenda mean that the “tadpoles” understood the electorate’s feelings on banking more than “hards.” The 1851 referendum, which asked Wisconsinites simply if banks should or should not be allowed in the state, passed 31,289 to 9,126 in favor of banking, from The Wisconsin Blue Book, 1940 (Madison, The State of Wisconsin, 1940), 225.
specific penalties and permanent restrictions against banking, countering that future legislatures should be free to allow banking if it was desired by the electorate. This was not a dramatic shift from Jacksonian democratic principles; individual freedom, majority rule, and distrust of monopolies all figured into the rhetorical arguments set forth in the convention. Rather, this was a fine tuning of message that would allow political figures in the future to reconcile the growth of complex, impersonal markets with the ideological legacy of Jefferson and Jackson; that is, they attempted to make paper money safe in a nation that prided itself on individual virtue.

A central political problem for “hards” like Ryan was that Americans wanted progress and development if it could be achieved without the sacrifice of liberty and virtue. As John Larson argues, many saw the positive possibilities of a complex domestic market, “in which all were welcome to participate and fortunes could be had by any man (or even woman) with ambition, industry and a little bit of capital.”

The pursuit of individual economic gain was a “revolutionary promise made manifest in economic liberty and personal wealth.” In Wisconsin’s population, comprised increasingly of people born in the Eastern United States by 1846, connections to markets and the possibility of individual economic gain were important factors influencing the image of what the state should become. The settlers transplanted from within the United States, mostly from New York and New England, hoped that Wisconsin’s largely undeveloped agricultural land would “be connected shortly with the world’s markets.” Thus while Ryan certainly appealed to those who saw the destruction of American liberty in the expansion of market complexity, most did not foresee the same danger. In encountering the uncertainty of complex commercial relationships, many called for more liberty rather than government restrictions. Banks posed a threat to equality in wealth, but the best protection against corruption and aristocracy was vigilant protection of individual liberty. “Tadpole” Democrats, along with some Whig delegates, used political ideology rather than economic policy to address banking. Banks were not what the people needed to be

---

afraid of, they argued, government overstepping its authority was of much more immediate concern.

Like his colleagues that followed him in attacking Ryan’s banking provision, Samuel Wotton Beall began his floor speech on November 10th by assuring his fellow delegates that he understood the dangers of banking. He conceded that “the gentleman from Racine (Ryan) has drawn a most dismal but not untrue picture of individual and financial calamity which the modern system of banking has inflicted upon this whole country.”68 Beall’s main concern was that special banking privileges were the products of legislative corruption, through which connected men created monopolies. In a romantic flourish hardly uncommon among the delegates, Beall asserted that “the sentiment of the masses, not only here, but all over the Union, is concentrating against monopolies of every kind with exclusive privileges.”69 Knowing the appeal of his proposed alternative rested on his being seen as a faithful Democrat, Beall was careful to assert his loyalty to anti-bank sentiments. In this way, opponents of Ryan’s proposal made the issue political, rather than economic. The odiousness of the bank report, as the Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette pointed out, was the “flagrant violation of ‘equal rights’” and its “wide departure from the ‘democratic’ standard.”70 “Soft” Democrats did not want to betray their party colleagues outright, or alienate voters unsure about banking, but they understood that restricting banking would be politically difficult in Wisconsin.

With his Democratic credentials carefully laid out, Beall proposed an alternative to Ryan’s provision on banking. It explicitly prohibited the legislature from granting bank charters in the state, but with a caveat. In the third section of Beall’s proposed amendment to the banking provision, legislatures were redundantly prohibited from authorizing banking, unless the legislature passed a law that was “general in its terms and conveying rights equally to every citizen.” If the legislature were to do pass a banking law in this manner, the legislation would be put before the general electorate for approval

68 Samuel Wotton Beall, in The Constitution of 1846, 123.
after the text of the law had been published in “six weekly newspapers located in different sections of the state for thirteen weeks in succession.”

Rather than prohibit future Wisconsinites from making legislative changes to its banking laws, Beall professed his trust in politically equal citizens to effectively combat the evils he claimed to see. Describing Ryan’s provision as “a measure the most odious and tyrannical ever attempted to be inflicted upon a free people,” Beall made the banking issue about politics rather than economics. Although willing to concede the terrors of banking and monopolies, Beall foresaw a time “when a system of general banking, open to everyone under proper restraints, shall be deemed advisable for the well-being of the state.” In his concluding remarks, Beall foreshadowed the eventual failure of the constitution before the voters of Wisconsin, asking the convention whether in their attempt to go beyond the example of other examples of Democratic conventions in Iowa and Texas in restricting banking they were “not also ahead of the just expectations of those who sent us here.”

Joining Beall in arguing for fewer restrictions on future legislatures, other Democrats attempted to highlight the possibility that Wisconsin might need banks in the future. Again, they were always careful to espouse their allegiance to the anti-banking principles of the national Democrats before doing so, and filled their messages with the rhetorical cues highlighting their allegiance to political equality and majority rule. Moses Gibson imagined a future in which Wisconsin would “become the great dazzling luminary of this western horizon,” in which “the future wants of the people” would include banking. Gibson desired to leave all questions to the “people,” as he had “confidence in them and future legislators.” Even a delegate from Jefferson County, whose “democracy” the Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette never heard questioned, saw the “injustice of so tying up the hands of future legislatures” with Ryan’s policy.

Since restricting banking permanently would threaten liberty, Democrats placed all authority to effectively control banking with the electorate. Banking was an onerous economic practice, but a bank only seriously threatened the public as a whole if it was

72 Beall, in The Constitution of 1846, 128.
73 Gibson, in The Constitution of 1846, 140.
74 Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette, in Quaife, The Struggle Over Ratification, 187.
unnaturally created. Creating corporations through charter was the unnatural advantage that threatened to undermine equality in the citizenry. Allowing incorporation only by special charter was a “violation of that great democratic principle of our government,” argued the *Racine Advocate*, “that principle which stands at the head of the Declaration of Independence.”

With democracy as its guiding principle, asked the *Advocate*, why should any state in the nation allow “the banker, the insurer, the bridge builder, the canal digger, [to] be distinguished by peculiar privileges?” According to this line of thought, rather than special charters or government regulations, banking should be open to anyone that wished to enter it. In this completely free system, people would choose for themselves which bankers possessed the reputation and level of security that made them safe enough to do business with.

By invoking the power of “the people” to make the right decisions about issues like banking, “tadpole” Democrats were essentially expressing their faith in the power of free individuals to remain virtuous even while participating in a complex market economy. They were articulating an important shift away agrarian republicanism, dependent on the cultivation of virtuous citizens through agrarian household production. Thomas Jefferson’s vision for a virtuous citizenry, one rearticulated by Jacksonian Democrats into the 1840s, depended on yeoman cultivating the earth. Jefferson believed that “as long they are chiefly agricultural,” the citizenry would remain virtuous in the United States. It was only when people “get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe,” that corruption enters the citizenry. Through cultivation of the land, citizens would retain their connection to local government, their individual responsibility and accountability, and a public consciousness that placed societal order and the public good above individual gain.

“Tadpoles” in the Wisconsin Constitutional Convention envisioned a societal model based on a complex market economy, not agriculture, which was safe for

---

75 *Racine Advocate*, November 25, 1846.
76 *Racine Advocate*, November 25, 1846.
77 *Racine Advocate*, March 12, 1846.
79 Jefferson to Madison, Dec 20, 1787.
American political institutions. Whereas Jeffersonians and Jacksonians sought to ensure a perpetual agrarian republic run by a limited government that would foster virtuous citizens, “tadpoles” reversed the equation. The citizenry was already virtuous in their minds, and as long as their virtue was allowed to manifest in government, that government would be virtuous. Much of the basic ideology of republicanism remained unchanged. Concentrated power was not to be trusted, government should remain limited, and individual liberty must underpin the notion of citizenship. However, whether they realized it or not, by removing yeoman production as a necessary condition and placing trust in the virtue of the citizenry no matter what their occupation, “tadpole” Democrats were establishing the rhetorical framework that allowed Jeffersonian principles to coexist with an industrialized economy. Ultimately, they were making Jefferson safe for the new, modern world.

The division between “hards” and “softs” rendered the large Democratic majority venerable, raising the possibility that the minority Whigs could form a coalition with the “softs” to encode anti-Jacksonian measures into the constitution. Yet this coalition never materialized, an important point for the future of the Second Party System. While Wisconsin’s voters were increasingly drifting from the Jacksonian mold on economic issues in the late 1840s, Whigs could not capitalize electorally. Like Democrats, Whigs in Wisconsin were hampered by distrust within the electorate of the ideology of the national party. Richard Current argues that Wisconsin Whigs carried a “stigma as the party of the rich and also as the party of the nativists.” 80 This reputation made them difficult to support for the territory’s many recent newcomers, both from abroad and within the United States, who sought equal economic and social opportunity in Wisconsin. Whigs, represented by “Wall street power, tact, talent and money,” as the Milwaukee Courier described, were bent on preventing men from enjoying “the fruits of the wealth they create.” 81 A “producer” writing to the paper in 1847 was certain that Whigs’ only political ideologies were “trickery, chicanery, and vile management” to get honest men to

81 Milwaukee Courier, May 12, 1847.
vote against their interests.\textsuperscript{82} Whigs and “soft” Democrats may have agreed on economic policy, but political realities prevented a restructuring of party loyalties in the late 1840s.

The lack of popular support for the 1846 constitution shows the gap between the political policies advanced by the national parties and the expectations of Wisconsin’s citizens. Despite the Democratic Party’s electoral popularity in Wisconsin during the 1840s, voter ideology was drifting from the national platform. The 1846 convention, and Wisconsin voters’ reactions to the product of that convention, shows a party system straining to cope with changing circumstances in the electorate. Democrats were unable to triangulate between the Jacksonian principles of the national party and the conflicting desire of their constituents for the government to have a role in promoting economic growth. Whigs, on the other hand, were unable to capitalize on Democratic disunity. Burdened with an elitist and nativist reputation, their numbers were simply too small to shape the first constitution to their wishes. Ultimately, the first constitutional convention in 1846 revealed the first signs of strain on the two party system that would manifest more concretely in the following decade.

The political elites that represented the Wisconsin Territory in the convention of 1846 are hardly representative of the population as a whole. Therefore taking the delegates claims to represent the “people” as sincere and legitimate is problematic. However, the rhetorical tenor of the delegates’ messages is useful for investigating how it is that Americans, and in this case Wisconsinites in particular, interacted with and interpreted political cues. The delegates that sought to temper Ryan’s banking provision were slightly ahead of their time. But they did provide a rhetorical framework for the near future of politics in Wisconsin. A Wisconsin population aware of the possible negative consequences of banking and paper currency was not yet ready to support government involvement in economic growth. Many in the state were like Ryan, who had moved to Wisconsin seeking new opportunities after experiencing near financial destitution following the Panic of 1837. But unlike Ryan, many Wisconsin voters were not ready to denounce complex economic growth. The delegates opposing his strict prohibition on banking foreshadowed a political system that sought to mitigate the negative effects of

\textsuperscript{82} Milwaukee Courier, May 12, 1847.
market complexity not with stricter government controls, but by ensuring complete individual economic freedom.
Chapter II

Resisting government-directed economic development served the Democratic Party well for nearly three decades from around 1820 to 1850, especially in Wisconsin during its territorial period. Yet during the first congressional election in the state in 1848, Democrats won just one of three House seats. The “Tadpole” Democrats that caused such a stark split within the Democratic ranks during the first constitutional convention reflected changing attitudes in the electorate towards banks, internal improvements, and corporations. Following the 1848 election Democrats quickly changed course to appeal to Wisconsin voters, going against the national party to endorse internal improvement measures. During the 1852 congressional elections, one in which Richard Current argues “internal improvements constituted the main issue,” all candidates, Democrats included, supported internal improvements. The only difference between the candidates was which projects they supported. The electoral landscape changed, and political parties adapted. During the late 1840s and early 1850s, Democratic voters increasingly supported internal improvement and incorporation schemes intended to expand access to national markets and credit. This rapid transformation in the attitudes of the Wisconsin electorate raises an important question – why did attitudes towards market capitalism change?

As the ultimate manifestation of the market revolution, railroads provide a useful point of entry to examine why attitudes towards a complex market changed. Railroads allowed farmers to market their crops over long distances, required a massive influx of capital and labor to construct, and were owned and operated by corporations rather than individuals. In essence, they embodied the opposite of a localized, pre-capitalist agricultural economy that Jacksonian Democrats foresaw for the nation during the Second Party System. One possible reason a broader portion of Wisconsinites accepted and supported railroads in the 1850s was that they understood the economic value of railroads and were willing to deal with any consequences that building railroads brought. As Craig Miner argues, Americans were “already materialistic, optimistic, and

---

‘progressive’” when railroads arrived.84 Miner argues that the prospect of a railroad “only intensified these preexisting characteristics of the culture.”85 Therefore, because railroads meant economic progress and opportunity, Americans inevitably accepted them. Although some historians support Miner’s claim that Americans wanted economic progress in the nineteenth century, a progressive mindset did not translate automatically to an acceptance of a new technology.86 Railroads and internal improvements were in fact controversial issues for a portion of the population during the Second Party System, and thus the weakening of resistance to them is crucial to understanding how Wisconsin’s political structure transformed during the mid-nineteenth century.87

Wisconsinites accepted and supported the construction of railroads in a gradual process that took place fitfully in Wisconsin during the 1840s and 1850s. Rather than simply accepting railroads because of the economic opportunity they represented, railroads had to be sold to the people of the state. Railroad promoters, acting with the help of newspaper editors, cultivated an image of railroads as natural and moral. What the pages of Wisconsin’s newspapers illustrate is that far from being a purely economic concern, railroads were evaluated based on the effects they would have on the character of citizens. That railroads would provide economic opportunities for Wisconsinites was rarely questioned, uncertainty stemmed from whether or not continued economic growth would endanger the character of the citizenry as a whole.88 By the early 1850s, a majority of Wisconsinites accepted that railroads, economic progress, and societal progress were

84 Craig Miner, A Most Magnificent Machine: America Adopts the Railroad, 1825-1862 (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2010), X.
85 Miner, A Most Magnificent Machine, X.
86 For example, John Lauritz Larson argues that Americans generally sought after any economic opportunity in The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 56.
interwined. Liberalism, or the belief that an individual’s pursuit of their self-interest would benefit society as a whole, reigned supreme. As a result of these changes, they also began to define themselves in sectional terms, rather than national. The North’s path to progress, encompassed by the mid-1850s in the ideology of “free soil, free labor, free men,” ran counter to the South, which Wisconsinites viewed as anti-progressive. Wisconsinites would not abandon the Union simply because they thought their ideas about progress differed from Southerners, but the growing consensus on economic policies in the 1850s greatly weakened the two-party system that had successfully quelled sectional tensions in the United States to that point.

Whether Democrat, Whig, or other, men in Wisconsin around mid-century lived in an age defined by the notion of progress. Nearly daily, newspaper editors touted Wisconsin as a state with incredible potential for economic and political progress. In August 1847 the Weekly Wisconsin looked to the “fine houses of beautiful brick” being constructed on the outskirts of Milwaukee as evidence of the inevitable progress that lay in the near future. In five years, the Weekly Wisconsin foresaw, the population would be “at least twenty-five thousand.” As opposed to the “gloomy and disagreeable” streets of Baltimore or Philadelphia, Milwaukee’s brick would look “bright and new” even twenty five years in the future, when the city “contains its 100,000 inhabitants.” Readers could be assured of Milwaukee’s prospects because of the “gigantic resources” of Wisconsin and its “unlimited variety of productions.” Business from Iowa and Minnesota, extending even to the Rockies, “must literally pour into the cities on Lake Michigan.”

Economic growth, however, was not the only, or even most important, form of progress for Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. Americans were concerned with how best to foster the expansion of democracy and political equality. Although not willing to use government to level society, they sought to “equalize the opportunities for

90 Weekly Wisconsin, August 4, 1847.
91 Weekly Wisconsin, August 4, 1847.
92 Weekly Wisconsin, August 4, 1847.
distinction based on merit.”

During the Second Party System, Jacksonian Democrats generally believed that political equality was the highest form of progress; a condition that required vigilant protection. “The developed theory of the self-made man,” according to Rush Welter, “provided both a social and moral justification for extraordinary inequalities.” But as long as political equality remained unthreatened, social order and democracy would progress. Economic progress was not resisted outright by Jacksonians, it was a byproduct of political equality. With the borders of the United States constantly expanding and commercial relationships becoming ever more complex, and profitable, a growing majority in Wisconsin believed in a more dynamic definition of progress. Many in the state, regardless of party, believed that economic progress was entwined with political equality. Not only did progress require political equality, it demanded the expansion of economic opportunity.

For Whigs during the 1840s and 1850s, the path toward progress was clear: Wisconsin needed to expand economic opportunities for its citizens through banks, railroads, internal improvements, and education, while at the same time preserving a uniform racial and cultural identity. But for Democrats in the late 1840s, the way forward was not clear. Similar to the divisions between “hards” and “softs” during the first constitutional convention, division within the party were apparent in two strongly Democratic newspapers advocating their visions for the future of Wisconsin. With the first constitutional convention set to commence later in the year, the Racine Advocate unequivocally stated that Wisconsin was to “be an agricultural state, and to our mind this one sentence sums up more advantages than any other boast we could make.” If Wisconsin’s citizens resisted the “temptations” of internal improvements, they would avoid the “vice and misery” that must necessarily follow. The paper implored Wisconsin to “leave ‘well enough’ alone,” and avoid rushing to exploit its natural

---

95 *Racine Advocate*, March 31, 1846.
96 *Racine Advocate*, March 31, 1846.
resources by incurring harmful debt.\textsuperscript{97} Progress for the editor of the \textit{Racine Advocate} meant maintaining the agrarian utopia that he believed already existed in Wisconsin by resisting banks, internal improvements, and anything else that threatened to benefit the well-connected over “virtuous” farmers.

Just two years later, the \textit{Weekly Wisconsin}, another staunch supporter of the Democratic Party, presented an alternative conception of progress. The paper reprinted the words of Henry Ward Beecher, who it said “advocate[s] the doctrines of that sound and radical democracy” that the paper supported.\textsuperscript{98} Rather than being content with their natural advantages, Beecher argued that Americans needed to strive for continual progress and improvement. “The lazy maxim ‘let well enough alone’ may rest and rust on the sluggard’s shield, but the sharp dints of active enterprise have long since battered it off from good men’s escutcheons. There is no such thing as ‘well enough,’ so long as the future has anything in it better than the present.”\textsuperscript{99} In other words, Americans could not wait by and let progress emerge organically, they had to actively look for ways to progress through “active enterprise.” By the late 1840s, Democrats increasingly supported internal improvements as an acceptable way for governments to support progress, following the course advanced by the \textit{Weekly Wisconsin}. Economic growth was not only part of progress, it was requisite to the improvement of America’s people.

In light of the Panic of 1837, and failed internal improvement schemes in neighboring Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana, promoters of railroads had to somehow overcome skepticism about the viability of government-sanctioned projects. Martin Hershock explores how Michigan coped with the emergence of a complex market economy, and especially the emergence of railroads, in \textit{The Paradox of Progress}. With railroads threatening to undermine traditional, precapitalist means of agricultural existence, many Michigan farmers reacted by protesting, sabotaging rail lines, and in some cases, tearing up tracks. Hershock argues that “their world and the rules by which it

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Racine Advocate}, March 31, 1846.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Weekly Wisconsin}, February 2, 1848.
\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Weekly Wisconsin}, February 2, 1848.
operated had changed suddenly, without their consent and in an unsettling manner.” 100

The attacks on railroads by Michigan’s farmers “reflected their traditional ideal of
personal dependencies and face-to-face relations.” 101 Ultimately, Michiganders had been
“conditioned to cringe at the mere thought of an expansive commercial economy by the
panic of 1837 and the severe depression that followed.” 102 The reaction to economic
change resulted in constitutional barriers in Michigan against market expansion, as well
as physical attacks on “the most tangible manifestation” of economic change, the
railroad. 103 In the minds of promoters, then, if railroads were seen as a natural way to
exploit nature’s bounty, rather than a government-controlled internal improvement
doomed to mismanagement, they could be safely considered part of progress.

In order to convince their fellow citizens of the merits of railroads, promoters
attempted to make railroads a “natural” tool for agricultural production, hardly different
than a steel hoe or plow. Just as lakes and rivers formed natural avenues for connecting
markets, railways served to carry the commerce that led to national progress and unity.
The project for a continental railroad, argued the Milwaukee Courier, had “the surest
foundation to build upon – the earth, the wilderness earth.” When “the labor of man is
applied to it, the reward is sure and rich.” 104 The Milwaukee Sentinel reprinted a speech
from William H. Seward, who asked whether people in the West “are to be denied the use
of the lakes, the railroads and canals, now constituting common and customary avenues
of travel, trade and social intercourse.” 105 Access to railroads was, in other words, as
natural a right as access to the use of natural waterways.

Promoters used Wisconsin’s geographic position to portray railroads as a way to
capitalize on the natural trade that must move from west to east through the state.
Disregarding any economic ties that Wisconsin could exploit through the Mississippi
River, the Wisconsin Weekly Patriot argued that Wisconsin was in a position to handle all

100 Martin Hershock, The Paradox of Progress: Economic Change, Individual Enterprise,
and Political Cultures in Michigan, 1837-1878 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003),
43.
101 Hershock, The Paradox of Progress, 44.
102 Hershock, The Paradox of Progress, xiv.
103 Hershock, The Paradox of Progress, xiv.
104 Milwaukee Courier, May 19, 1847.
105 Milwaukee Sentinel, March 29, 1850.
the trade from west of the state going to markets in the northeast United States. By constructing a proposed rail route west and north from Madison, Iowa and Minnesota would “in turn naturally become endorsers for, and contributors to its progress.”

Business “necessarily flows to this central point,” argued the paper, and would be carried from Madison “around the lakes to the Atlantic ports.” Supporters of railroads followed the model of earlier Jeffersonians and Jacksonians extolling the virtue of humans adding value to soil through agriculture, portraying the steel of the road as an extension of nature, waiting only to be made valuable through human labor. In other words, railroads did not threaten the independence of the individual farmer, they only strengthened it. All wealth was still to be “derived and sustained from the soil,” with railroads providing Wisconsinites the opportunity to take advantage of their natural resources.

Railroads were not business ventures, they were portrayed as common tools that would allow more people to exploit nature’s bounty.

Even if they were “natural” tools, however, railroads threatened to undermine the obligation citizens were supposed to feel for each other in a liberal, agricultural society. Americans in the nineteenth century placed an unbending faith in the power of self-interest to foster order. This was not a magical equation in which people would naturally treat each other fairly in their interactions. It was a belief that if self-interest guided people in their private affairs, society would remain just because men would be forced to interact with and establish trust with their fellow citizens. In turn, Joyce Appleby argues that “self-interest in market transactions presumed a rationality that was actually complimentary to human nature.”

Humans were not naturally destructive to each other, but performed rationally if a society was governed by a liberal market. Tight-knit agricultural communities meant that a person would never be far removed from the consequences of his actions, and therefore would govern himself accordingly. Railroads dramatically altered the space in which market interactions took place,

---

106 Wisconsin Weekly Patriot, November 18, 1854.
107 Wisconsin Weekly Patriot, November 18, 1854.
108 Wisconsin Weekly Patriot, November 18, 1854.
110 Agricultural production as central to liberal thought is covered in Appleby, Capitalism and a New Social Order, 91-93.
however. In order to convince Wisconsinites of the viability of railroads, promoter had to demonstrate that a citizen would feel the same connection with a person they did business with even if they never met or saw that person.

Railroad promoters did not revise the equation of mutual dependence. What they did was to expand the space over which self-interest could compel individuals to act justly in public and private. By the late 1840s, railroad promoters adjusted the classical conceptions of liberalism to make an economic relationship between merchants in Milwaukee and New Orleans, about 1,000 miles apart, the same as one between merchants in Milwaukee and Racine, about 20 miles apart. To the *Weekly Wisconsin*, the change was only a natural part of the progress of the nation. Any person “who can trace the extraordinary force and success of individual enterprise, when unfettered by restriction and left free to use education, industry and fidelity,” could see how man’s individual self-interest promoted “the weal of his fellow-man, for the advancement of the community.”

Rather than alienating market participants from each other by expanding the space over which transactions were conducted, promoters argued that railroads bound people even tighter in a system of mutual dependence. In addition to being natural tools, and despite the sectional tension emerging over slavery, railroads would strengthen the natural bonds of Union, just as the Mississippi and Atlantic naturally bound the nation together in earlier decades. “*Sectionalism and railways cannot exist together,*” argued the *Weekly Wisconsin*, as railroads “gradually become chains of adamant, to bind people together.”

“*Internal improvements*” carried the stigma of corruption and artificiality, so railroad promoters attempted to portray the iron road as a natural avenue of commerce that could align the interests of the nation. Essentially they expanded the space over which self-interests could align to create an ordered, bound society. Railroads did not undermine the binds people felt for each other, they strengthened mutual obligations and interests.

Like many Jacksonian Democrats, Wisconsinites feared government intervention in the economy. But whereas Jacksonian Democrats believed that government needed to

---

111 *Weekly Wisconsin*, January 6, 1848.
112 *Weekly Wisconsin*, November 24, 1847.
play a role in regulating the economy – by restricting the incorporation of banks, for example – Wisconsinites by the 1850s believed that government should play no role at all. Rather than hesitatingly accept market forces, Wisconsinites increasingly placed faith in the wonders of the market to provide for the needs and wants of the people. As part of this transition, questioning consumer goods for their morality or whether they were justified in a republican citizenry was no longer common. Any byproduct of market commerce was good, and even if negative effects did result, the market would address them. Discussion of a seemingly innocuous new commodity - simple heating stoves widely used in Wisconsin - demonstrates how commerce and commodification took on an air of inevitability by the early 1850s. The stoves created a “national poison,” their exhaust “breathed by hundreds and thousands in almost all our lecture rooms, concert rooms, public halls and private assemblies.”\textsuperscript{113} Although the negative health effects of the stoves were a given, “they suit the country, especially the new country. If the more enlightened and better informed throw them aside, the great bulk of the people will not.”\textsuperscript{114}

The inevitability of commodification led to a belief that wherever possible, government should let private individuals serve the needs of the citizenry as a whole. In 1851 the \textit{Racine Advocate} advocated for the privatization of the postal system. The paper attacked the Post Office’s monopoly on carrying mail, arguing that if Americans would just “throw away all monopoly,” they would find “men ready to carry letters for you as speedily, as regularly, and more safely than the government does.”\textsuperscript{115} While considering the counter-point that many areas that the Post Office now served would no longer have access to mails without the public system, the \textit{Advocate} pointed out the proliferation of wheat farmers in remote areas. Because there was a national market for wheat, even areas without easy transportation to markets found a way to move their products. In the case of the mail, the \textit{Advocate} trusted that if a letter is “important enough [it] will be sent, if not important enough [it] will not be written.”\textsuperscript{116} In other words, a private system would

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{113} \textit{Racine Advocate}, January 8, 1851.
\item \textsuperscript{114} \textit{Racine Advocate}, January 8, 1851.
\item \textsuperscript{115} \textit{Racine Advocate}, January 8, 1851.
\item \textsuperscript{116} \textit{Racine Advocate}, January 8, 1851.
\end{itemize}
provide for the important mails to be conveyed regularly, without forcing tax funds into a
system that did not operate efficiently.

Finally, promoters argued, railroads inculcated the habits that made moral
citizens. Railroads “compel the Public to adapt their habits to the regulations of the
railways.”117 Because trains move on a strict schedule, the user has to adapt to that
schedule in order to use the railroad. This was neither a sign of bondage to an impersonal
market force nor a symbol of lost individual freedom. The rigidity of the railroad
schedule imparted the virtue of punctuality, “one of those virtues that make up the sum of
a superior character.”118 The punctuality that railroads forced upon its users then spread
to the population as a whole, as a “loss, inconvenience, trouble and vexation” came from
dealing “with them who are wanting in punctuality.”119 In reprinting a quote from
William Ogden, who was attempting to raise capital for a railroad out of Chicago, the
Weekly Wisconsin even extolled the moral advantages railroads had over canals. Without
offering any specific reasons, the paper argued that “all must concede, that the morals of
a people is far more promoted by a railway.”120 Again, railroads were portrayed not as a
threat to republican society, but as a tool to further cultivate a moral, virtuous society.

Contrary to the promises of promoters, constructing railroads in Wisconsin before
the Civil War was wrought with corruption and fitful progress. Lacking capital, railroad
entrepreneurs turned to Wisconsin’s public lands in order to finance construction. Early
representatives of Wisconsin rail interests “pitted their strength and political skill against
one another” in Washington, attempting to gain a federal land grant.121 In 1856 the
United States government awarded more than a million acres along 503 miles of two
northern routes in the state.122 As with other land grants in the nineteenth century, the
railroad land grant was given to the state, rather than to individual railroad corporations,
which was then to award the land to corporations that would build the actual road. The

117 Weekly Wisconsin, November 17, 1847.
118 Weekly Wisconsin, November 17, 1847.
119 Weekly Wisconsin, November 17, 1847.
120 Weekly Wisconsin, November 17, 1847.
121 Robert S. Hunt, Law and Locomotives: The Impact of the Railroad on Wisconsin Law
122 Hunt, Law and Locomotives, 8.
editor of the Republican Party organ, the *Milwaukee Daily American*, summarized the optimism that many Wisconsinites felt about the prospects of railroads in the state. As long as the land was not “frittered away to politicians and speculators,” the editor argued, a railway to the northwest part of the state would soon “make Wisconsin the most populous of all the sisterhood.”\(^{123}\) Only a lack of transportation, the editor argued, kept industrious citizens from “the rich and unpeopled Lake Superior region.”\(^{124}\)

“Politicians and speculators” may have been the only thing standing in the way of an honest distribution of the land, but they proved a mighty obstacle indeed. As the legislature debated how to distribute the land, railroad men began the process of lobbying legislators. Byron Kilbourn, a giant of Wisconsin railroad entrepreneurship, ensured that his La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad would be awarded land for construction of a northern line. With just eight exceptions, the legislators who supported the bill granting the La Crosse and Milwaukee land received a financial stake in the corporation in the form of securities. In addition to the legislators, the state comptroller, the lieutenant-governor, clerks in the Assembly, and newspaper editors received cash payments or securities with the railroad in exchange for their support of the La Crosse and Milwaukee.\(^{125}\) Far from disinterested republican statesmen, Wisconsin’s early legislators rarely kept their own private interests separate from their public roles.

As the panic of 1857 set in, Wisconsin investors had sunk millions into railroad projects that were producing disappointingly little in actual track. Robert Nesbit argues that most of Wisconsin’s efforts at infrastructure development in the 1850s resulted in “disappointment or disaster,” the product of “misguided enthusiasm, unrecognized economic realities, ineptitude, mismanagement, and plain dishonesty.”\(^{126}\) By 1857 Wisconsin farmers had mortgaged nearly $5,000,000 worth of property to buy railroad stock, displaying their desire to usher in progress in the form of a steel road.\(^{127}\) Promoters such as Kilbourn had touted local investment as a means for Wisconsinites to

have a direct stake in their own development. But with farmers mortgaging their land to eastern creditors, Wisconsin’s rail corporations and their stockholders found themselves in serious debt with no prospect of escape.

By the time Wisconsin’s first experiment with railroads ended in disaster, the Second Party System was already history. The unequivocal acceptance of market capitalism that led to railroad speculation foreshadowed a politically dire situation for both Whigs and Democrats in Wisconsin. By the mid-1850s, sectional issues framed much of the political debate in Wisconsin. But sectionalism did not inevitably emerge as important in the 1850s. Before sectional concerns could animate Wisconsin politics, two shifts in thought among voters needed to take place. First, economic issues needed to be replaced as the dominant source of difference between major political parties. Because railroads were increasingly seen as natural, moral, and progressive, both parties in the state converged on an economic plan calling for railroads and free banking. Economic issues had been the defining difference between the parties during the Second Party System, but by removing this source of differentiation, the parties were actually weakened by their inability to put forth a unique position. The arguments in the *Racine Advocate* may appear to the twenty-first century observer as common American views on the role of government. However, they emerged in a broader transformation in the state, during which the majority of Wisconsinites came to see capitalism and self-interest as morally sound and progressive.

Second, Wisconsinites had to develop a cultural self-perception in which they saw themselves as both different from, and superior to, the South. Slavery played a crucial role in this process, but only as part of a larger shift in which Wisconsinites saw their way of life and government as more moral, more equal, more free, and more in line with their conceptualization of American history. The distrust of government apparent in discussions of railroad regulation, operation of the Post Office, or even regulation of dangerous personal stoves, was not the result of a complete lack of faith in government to do anything. More precisely, a lack of faith in government existed from a lack of faith in a government that southerners participated in. Because southerners did not have the same system of values as northerners, at least in the eyes of Wisconsinites, a new party led by northerners was needed to reign in corruption and poor administration.
Concern over the morality of the market alone does not explain the end of the Second Party System. That the Whig Party did not come to dominate Wisconsin politics by the end of the 1840s is evidence that banks, internal improvements, and corporations were not the only questions that troubled voters. But the debates about specific economic policies, and what the state government’s role should be in promoting them, show that as Wisconsin transitioned into statehood in 1848, the two dominant national parties no longer offered voters distinct choices. Both parties attempted to capitalize on the electorate’s support for an improved infrastructure. With the parties struggling to differentiate themselves, space for third parties emerged. Convergence among the electorate in Wisconsin on economic issues did not cause the end of the Second Party System, but it provided the conditions necessary to weaken two-party dominance.
Chapter III

By the early-1850s, when Democratic and Whig politicians advocated similar economic agendas, neither side motivated voters to support them. In essence, a political vacuum emerged, with several third party movements attempting to take advantage of discontent among the electorate by highlighting a specific issue. The Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party, and Know-Nothings challenged the two-party system by focusing their attention on issues such as intemperance, immigration, and slavery.\textsuperscript{128} In each case, third party leaders attempted to ignite fear in the electorate, and turn that fear into political action. David Brion Davis argues that the propensity for Americans to define tyrannical opponents runs throughout American history, suggesting that conflict is inherent in a liberal society. The themes of “corrupted and inaccessible minds, of an expansionist force whose entering wedges lead to unconditional enslavement, and of a radical need for purification and rededication” are common in “anti-Masonry, anti-Mormonism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-slavery.”\textsuperscript{129} As Davis argues, “social purpose and identity” are in a free society constantly “shaped by identifying the perfect enemy.”\textsuperscript{130} Popular support for liberal economic policies in the electorate left Wisconsinites without a “perfect enemy,” weakening Democrats and Whigs.

With so many third party movements emerging in Wisconsin during mid-century, why did the party reorganization of the 1850s result in the Democrat-Republican dichotomy? In other words, why did the Republican Party emerge as the enduring opposition to Democrats and not Whigs, the Liberty Party or the Free Soil Party? Temperance advocates, for example, had a strong section of the population from which to draw support. According to the Milwaukee Free Democrat, a “large number” of women in Milwaukee seemed “to be steadily diving deeper into dissipation every year” from


\textsuperscript{129} David Brion Davis, \textit{The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 84.

\textsuperscript{130} Davis, \textit{The Slave Power Conspiracy}, 84.
their indulgence in drink. So many Wisconsinites were concerned about the effects of alcohol on the population that in 1853 a referendum banning alcohol sales passed 27,519 to 24,109. But the temperance movement, even after the Democratic legislature ignored the referendum in 1854, never materialized into an enduring political movement. The same was true for the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party, the latter of which faded away despite its successful 1848 campaign, in which it won 23 seats in the Wisconsin Legislature and elected Charles Durkee to the House. The failure of two anti-slavery parties shows that the rise of the Republican Party, also an anti-slavery party, was a contingent event. It took a specific set of political conditions, and a specific style of direction from its leaders, in order to achieve electoral success in Wisconsin.

For the Republican Party to emerge as a political force capable of winning elections in Wisconsin, two important transitions had to take place. First, Wisconsinites had to develop a conception of southern character and the “slave power” that was alien to their own conception of republican society. It was not enough that northerners believed that slavery was immoral, they had to believe that slaveholders themselves were incapable of exercising virtuous citizenship – possessing freedom without denying freedom to others, respecting political equality, and placing public good over private interests - because of their immorality. Next, in order for negative perceptions of the South to translate into political action, Wisconsinites had to believe that the “slave power” was a direct threat to their way of life. A series of actions taken by the federal government, namely the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, highlighted for Wisconsinites the “slave power’s” ability to shape the federal government to their will. When that power was brought to bear within Wisconsin, as was the case with the attempted re-enslavement of Racine resident Joshua Glover in 1854,

131 Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat, November 9, 1859.
Wisconsinites were reminded that slavery was not only a threat to republican government in Alabama and Mississippi, but threatened their own way of life as well. By the mid-1850s, voters believed it was only a matter of time before slavery, and along with it aristocracy, political inequality, and absence of liberty, would take hold in Wisconsin if the slave power went unchecked. The southern slave-owner was the “perfect enemy” that political leaders could employ. Only a completely new political party, one with no ties to the South, could stem the advance of the South and its institutions. In short, a population already opposing slavery began to feel that slavery threatened republicanism in the North, and in turn the future of the United States as a nation of free white men.

Wisconsinites developed a cultural conception of southerners from a variety of sources, from novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to minstrel shows, to travel diaries printed in newspapers.\(^{135}\) In August 1856, with violence in Kansas and an upcoming presidential election dominating political news, the *Milwaukee Daily American* printed “A Melodrama – In One Act.” The short script, taking up less than one entire column, was set in the dining room of Willard’s Hotel in Washington D.C. At 11 a.m., House Representative Herbert and a friend arrive in the dining room, gruffly demanding breakfast from the waiter. The waiter explains to Mr. Herbert that he is unable to serve breakfast, as patrons must “obtain an order from the powers that be,” and without such an order the waiter risked punishment if “such disobedience is discovered.” Mr. Herbert quickly loses his temper, demanding to be served, reminding the waiter that “my country’s representative in Congress I am.” The representative even brandishes his pistol to show the waiter the seriousness of his request. Finally, after continued refusal of service, Mr. Herbert violently attacks the waiter, first throwing a chair, “followed up with coffee urn, plates, knives, forks, etc.” In the ensuing “general melee,” Mr. Herbert draws his pistol and shoots the waiter through the heart, killing him.\(^{136}\)

After the violent episode in the hotel, the scene transitions to a courtroom, where Mr. Herbert defends himself in front of a sympathetic judge. While there is no doubt that the representative killed the waiter, the judge considers social station in deciding the


\(^{136}\) *Milwaukee Daily American*, August 30, 1856.
sentence. “Had the deceased killed you, ‘twould have been murder,” exclaims the judge, but since Mr. Herbert is a gentleman and a congressional representative, his actions do not warrant severe punishment. A ten thousand dollar bond is set, the money for which is quickly collected by Mr. Herbert’s friends, and the representative walks away a free man. Finally, the scene closes with the “Goddess of Liberty” entering. Upon surveying the situation, she cries, “And this is modern justice! this a gentleman, forsooth!”137

The short “melodrama” was in fact a rendition of actual events at the Willard’s Hotel in Washington D.C. Philemon Thomas Herbert, born in 1825 in Alabama, had his first episode of violence as a student at the University of Alabama in 1844, when he stabbed a fellow student. Herbert later moved to Texas, then to California, and represented California as a Democrat during the Thirty-fourth Congress (1855-57). In 1856, Herbert shot and killed an Irish waiter in a Washington hotel, but was later acquitted of the murder. The event tarnished Herbert’s political career, and he returned to California, and then Texas, to practice law. He went on to serve as an officer in the Confederate Army, dying from wounds sustained in battle in July of 1864.138

The dramatic representation of Herbert stood in contrast to the republican citizenry that northerners conceptualized themselves as. Readers could discern immediately from the dialogue between Herbert and the waiter that the representative had aristocratic pretensions. In the script, Mr. Herbert’s only claim to exhibit authority over the waiter is his social status. What made his inflated self-worth dangerous was his inability to control his “passion.” In his initial outburst at the waiter, Mr. Herbert demands to be served, “or well I know my passion will o’er power me.”139 The appearance of passion, and the inability to control it, is not accidental. Mr. Herbert acts as a stand in for men, in public office and in private affairs, unable to control themselves virtuously or honorably.140 The inability to control passions was not simply a concern for the proper operation of government. That Mr. Herbert’s inability to control his passions

137 Milwaukee Daily American, August 30, 1856.
139 Milwaukee Daily American, August 30, 1856.
resulted in the death of an innocent working-man displays how social order itself was threatened.

The cumulative result of individual dishonor, as displayed by the script, was that corrupt individuals would collude to undermine the social equality and liberty that so many Americans in the North believed democratic American institutions bestowed. The judge’s acquittal of Mr. Herbert was a sign that citizens were not equal under the law when corruption was widespread. The judge’s ruling is filled with allusions to the “natural” inequalities between the waiter and Mr. Herbert. Most importantly, these inequalities were not based on differences in talent or ability, but inherent. The waiter was simply “a common hireling,” disposable and unequal in the eyes of the judge. In a tone that readers recognized as blatantly aristocratic, the judge espouses his “respect” for the “high station” of Mr. Herbert. Imbued with an historical imagination filled with contempt for British Aristocracy and arbitrary power, readers not only harbored resentment at the actions of Mr. Herbert and the judge, but also considered their actions decidedly un-American and dangerous to the republic.

The script makes no mention of slavery explicitly, but the Goddess of Liberty’s closing monologue makes it clear that Mr. Herbert is a representative of slave-owning southern character. It did not matter whether or not the reader knew that the real Herbert was a representative of free-state California. If they did, then he represented a stooge of the South, if they did not, the script portrayed him to the reader as a southern aristocrat. Not only did he exemplify the deteriorated character of southern men, but he also represented an affront to American history. The Goddess of Liberty moaned for her “best beloved child, America” which by the judge’s ruling “should so disgrace its birth.” What followed was the clear reference to the southern nature of the attack on American tradition. “May the time quickly come, when ruffians, though high in office they may be

---

142 *Milwaukee Daily American*, August 30, 1856.
… shall be but ruffians still and so such treated.”

By using “ruffians” to characterize men like Mr. Herbert, the script makes an explicit connection to the violence in Kansas, which many in the North blamed on “ruffians” from Missouri.

This short script encapsulated the fears and frustrations of Northerners in a way that no political speech could hope to. Although there were references to governmental figures, with Mr. Herbert and the judge at the center of the story, the themes of the script were much broader than policy or government institutions. The most immediate threat to society came from the breakdown of morality among white southerners. Their inability to control their passions, their propensity to resort to violence, their sense of aristocratic privilege, the corruption of public office, for a Northern audience all pointed to the breakdown of republican character. Slavery serves as an underlying corrupting influence in the deplorable actions of Mr. Herbert and the judge. But slavery was only of secondary concern behind the corruption of character apparent in both figures. As Rush Welter summarizes, southern slavery threatened “the underlying structure of free institutions” throughout the nation.

The southern slave-owner was the “perfect enemy” that Wisconsinites needed to combat through political action.

Southern slave-owners posed a structural threat to the Republic, in the eyes of a growing portion of northerners in the 1850s, because they exhibited a disproportionate degree of influence at the national level. “The Fugitive Slave Law, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise (Kansas-Nebraska Act), and the Dred Scott decision,” as David Brion Davis argues, “suggested a degree of Southern unity, premeditation, and control.”

Northerners worried that if slavery was to endure in the nation, “democracy and every form of republic or constitutional monarchy would be sure to perish throughout the world.” If southerners possessed the ability to control the federal government and undo the restrictions on slavery in the Missouri Compromise, the spread of slavery into northern states was a real possibility in the eyes of concerned northerners. Rather than a distant problem, Wisconsinites felt threatened by a national government that by 1854 they believed could destroy their way of life.

144 Milwaukee Daily American, August 30, 1856. (Italics in original)
145 Welter, Mind of America, 359.
146 Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy, 18.
147 Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy, 53.
Fear of the conceptual slave power exerting itself within the borders of Wisconsin was made real in the capture of a fugitive slave in Racine in 1854. On the night of March 10th, Joshua Glover, a fugitive slave working at a sawmill in southeastern Wisconsin, was playing cards with two friends in a cabin he rented from his employer. Outside the cabin Benammi Garland, a slave-owner from St. Louis, along with six other men, stood armed with a certificate for Glover’s removal under the Fugitive Slave Act issued by a Missouri court, along with a warrant for Glover’s arrest from the U.S. District Court in Milwaukee. Glover’s friend Nelson Turner, a free black man from Mississippi, allowed the party to enter after hearing the knock, and a violent melee ensued as the group attempted to subdue and restrain Glover. Despite intense resistance, the arresting party was finally able to carry away Glover, “manacled and bleeding from the head.”

Attempting to expedite the process of removing Glover from Wisconsin, Garland and his party carried Glover to Milwaukee, where they could quickly receive a hearing from the U.S. commissioner for Wisconsin. However, almost as soon as Glover was being carried out of his cabin in chains, abolitionists in southeastern Wisconsin were raising the alarm. The next day, led by newspaper editor Sherman Booth and lawyer James Paine, a crowd gathered around the Milwaukee courthouse to protest Glover’s capture and the denial of judicial process. The crowd assembled into a committee and drafted resolutions demanding a fair trial by jury, observation of habeas corpus, and pledging the assembly’s commitment to “stand by the prisoner and do its utmost to secure him a trial by jury.” As night fell, however, the assembly learned that the deputy holding Glover, Marshal Cotton, would not obey the writ of habeas corpus Paine had secured earlier from a Milwaukee judge. As the crowd milled about near the courtyard, the assembly leaders hinted at the next possible course of action, reminding the crowd that “sometimes the people must take the law into their own hands or become slaves themselves.”

Using pickaxes and a makeshift battering ram, the crowd followed the

---

cue and broke into the jail, freed Glover, and placed him in a buggy en route to Waukesha, where he would take the Underground Railroad to Canada.  

Although cautioning the need for greater “respect for law and order,” the Democratic *Weekly Wisconsin* understood the frustration in Milwaukee surrounding Glover’s capture by Garland. “There cannot be a doubt that the attempted repeal of the Missouri compromise has so far exasperated many that they consider themselves absolved from the obligation to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law.” Even the city’s “first men,” known for their “character, honesty and integrity,” had rallied to Glover’s aid in the rescue, a sign of the broad anger generated by Glover’s arrest. Wisconsinites felt that the Missouri Compromise was a “measure yielded to the South for the sake of a permanent settlement of the slavery question.” From the perspective of the *Weekly Wisconsin*, what motivated the crowd was not anger about the treatment of Glover, but the feeling that the Kansas-Nebraska Act re-opened the possibility of slavery encroaching on the North. Despite their willingness to honor slavery where it already existed, they felt they were continually asked to yield to Southern demands, with nothing in return.

Booth and other leaders of the rallies were radical abolitionists that desired political and social equality regardless of race. However, they understood that to connect with a broader portion of the population they could not stress racial equality. In addressing the assembled crowd on the 11th of March, they claimed that the issue at hand was not Glover or African Americans in general, but freedom for white Wisconsinites. In a similar vein to pro-slavery southerners who charged that allowing the federal government to restrict slavery in the territories opened up the possibility of restrictions on slavery where it already existed, Booth argued that “laws suspending the writ of habeas corpus and trial by jury” meant that anyone “could be made a slave.” The crowd in Milwaukee responded forcefully to this perceived threat to their freedom. In the aftermath of the Glover affair, Booth and other political reformers used the rhetoric of slavery’s threat to northern freedom to build momentum for a new political party.

---

152 *Weekly Wisconsin*, March 15, 1854.
153 *Weekly Wisconsin*, March 15, 1854.
154 *Weekly Wisconsin*, March 15, 1854.
With the Glover issue serving as a unifying force, antislavery elements of Whigs, Free-Soilers and Democrats organized a new political party, calling themselves Republicans.156 After a small gathering in Ripon, leaders of the new party held a larger meeting in Madison in July of 1854. They agreed on a platform of barring slavery from the territories, which the leaders saw as freeing them from other commitments to “abolition, prohibition, Negro suffrage, women’s rights, land limitation, and nativist leanings.”157 Other third party movements had been hampered by an inability to attract large portions of the electorate, especially immigrant voters, away from Democratic ranks. The People’s Ticket, for example, a combination of anti-slavery activists also interested in intemperance, “was drowned in an amber tide” of anti-prohibition sentiment from immigrants when they attempted a prohibition referendum in 1853.158 But the new Republican Party focused exclusively on limiting the spread of slavery, “the one issue on which all Republicans could agree.”159 The Milwaukee Daily American summarized the Republican platform in 1856, arguing that their advocacy for slavery restriction in no way opened them to “the charge of fanaticism.”160 The Republican Party’s only concern was that the “right to expect the institutions of freedom and free labor would be allowed to exist undisturbed.”161 Glover’s capture transformed anger and fear over slavery and the South into a powerful political movement that quickly gained momentum in Wisconsin.

By the next statewide election, held in the fall of 1854, the Republican Party was strong enough to contest Democrats for seats in the state legislature throughout the state. Republicans Cadwallader Washburn and Charles Billinghurst took two out of three seats in the Wisconsin House delegation, and the party had a strong enough showing in state

160 Milwaukee Daily American, August 18, 1856.
161 Milwaukee Daily American, August 18, 1856.
legislature to control Wisconsin’s selection for Senator.\textsuperscript{162} The next year Republican Coles Bashford was elected Governor. Thus in less than two years the Republican Party took firm control of Wisconsin politics. The Democratic Party, faced with a serious threat to its position in the state, once again tried to shift its policy, just as they had earlier on economic policy. The Democratic \textit{Weekly Wisconsin} assured its readers that just like Republicans, Democrats stood in defense of the “reserved rights of the States,” and was “opposed to the extension of slavery.”\textsuperscript{163} In an attempt to paint Republicans as nativist, the paper rarely even used the word republican, preferring to use “Know-Nothings” when discussing the new party. Connection with the South was too much for the Democratic Party to overcome, however. The Republican Party grew quickly in part because of its complete abandonment of connection with the South.

The legal battle ensuing Glover’s rescue kept Wisconsinites focused on the perceived threat to their society from southerners, prompting a sustained and active legal challenge to federal authority in the form of a states’ rights movement. Days after a crowd broke Glover out of the Milwaukee jail, the United States Attorney for Wisconsin, John Sharpstein, charged Sherman Booth for aiding and abetting a violation of the Fugitive Slave Act.\textsuperscript{164} Booth’s attorney, Byron Paine, applied to the Wisconsin Supreme Court for a writ of habeas corpus releasing Booth from jail. Paine used the opportunity to make an argument denouncing the Fugitive Slave Act as unconstitutional, as it violated Wisconsin’s state sovereignty and failed to follow judicial procedure. Justice Abram D. Smith of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, in a surprise and unprecedented ruling, sustained all of Paine’s arguments and declared the Fugitive Slave Act unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{165}

By declaring a federal law unconstitutional, Justice Smith placed Wisconsin in direct legal battle with the United States government. The Pierce administration immediately ordered an appeal to the full three-member Wisconsin Supreme Court. Along with Edward G. Ryan, Sharpstein argued that chaos would ensue if states were

\textsuperscript{162} Current, \textit{The History of Wisconsin}, 224.  
\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Weekly Wisconsin}, November 8, 1854.  
\textsuperscript{165} Ranney, “Suffering the Agonies…,” 191.
allowed to declare federal laws unconstitutional. At the same time Sharpstein and Ryan were arguing in front of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, Judge Andrew G. Miller was presiding over a federal grand jury considering an indictment of Booth. Miller echoed Sharpstein and Ryan’s arguments, while also drawing a comparison between Smith’s ruling and South Carolina’s nullification efforts in 1833. With the political climate in Wisconsin favoring Booth, the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld Judge Smith’s original decision. Sharpstein’s ensuing appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court was then hampered by “an extraordinary order which the Wisconsin court gave its clerk” not to send their decision to Washington. By 1855, the Wisconsin court “was now moving toward open defiance of the federal government.”

The Wisconsin Supreme Court’s actions made slavery the dominant issue in Wisconsin politics, and presented an opportunity for the Republican Party to capitalize politically. In April 1855, in the first Supreme Court election following the Glover rescue, Justice Samuel Crawford faced Republican challenger Orasamus Cole, who supported ruling the Fugitive Slave Act unconstitutional. Cole’s decisive victory showed that there was “no question that the Wisconsin electorate stood firmly behind” the court’s decision to side with Booth. Republicans received further bolstering in 1859 as Chief Justice Roger Taney of the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the Wisconsin court’s ruling and upheld the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Act. In response, the Republican-dominated Wisconsin Legislature passed resolutions condemning Taney’s ruling and declaring it “void and of no force.” In the following Supreme Court Election in 1859, which turned “almost solely on the issue of Wisconsin’s resistance of the Fugitive Slave Act,” Byron Paine won a seat on the Wisconsin Supreme Court, elected by a solid 54 percent majority in an election with the highest voter turnout in a state election to date.

---

166 Wisconsin’s states’ rights advocates drew on the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, written by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson in the late eighteenth century, and sought to avoid connection to the nullification efforts of John Calhoun. For more on the nullification crisis, see Welter, Mind of America, 243-249.
167 Ranney, “Suffering the Agonies…,” 196.
168 Ranney, “Suffering the Agonies…,” 196.
Historians note instances of Republicans before the Civil War tempering their antislavery and pro-northern message to appeal to a wider audience. David Potter points out that in 1860, for example, Republicans “had nothing to gain by pointing out that the election of their candidate might produce the grimmest emergency the republic had ever seen.”\footnote{David Potter, \textit{The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861} (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976), 431.} Republicans had to dilute their antislavery message to compete throughout the North. Without a message that would “appease the South and renounce racial egalitarianism,” Republican chances to win in a general election were jeopardized.\footnote{Sean Wilentz, \textit{The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 764. For more on the conservatism of the Republican Party before the war, see Eric Foner, \textit{Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).} As Elizabeth Varon points out, Republican assertions of white supremacy and appeals to conciliation with the South “has led a school of modern historians to doubt the party’s antislavery credentials.”\footnote{Elizabeth R. Varon, \textit{Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 279.}

In Wisconsin, the Republican Party did have to avoid too close a relationship with antislavery radicals. As the repeated failure of black suffrage referendums suggests, the electorate was not ready to accept universal political and social equality regardless of race. However, following the Glover rescue, the Republican Party in Wisconsin increasingly portrayed itself as the aggressive defender of northern liberty. Rather than advertise the party as the defenders of the Union, Republican spokesman in Wisconsin portrayed a nation already at war with itself in the late 1850s. Just after the presidential election of 1856, the \textit{Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat} applauded the rapid growth of the Republican Party, while also prophesizing the imminent destruction of the Union if the South went unchecked. Americans that believed in the perpetuity of the republic were “blinded by [a] monstrous illusion.”\footnote{\textit{Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat}, November 12, 1856} They attributed the future demise of the nation to the “lack of integrity” in the citizenry, in which “baseness and corruption have everywhere taken the place of integrity and probity.”\footnote{\textit{Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat}, November 12, 1856.} Continued violence in Kansas allowed party leaders to portray sectional tensions as a battle, rather than a political
disagreement. The *Daily Free Democrat* chronicled the “truly suffering condition” of northern settlers in Kansas. By donating food and money to free-staters in Kansas, Wisconsinites could help “those heroes who have nobly stood by our rights in Kansas.” According to this rhetoric, the South was already waging war on the North by the mid-1850s, and northerners needed to respond in kind.

The emergence of the Republican Party in Wisconsin did not end the Democratic Party. With the Republican ranks drawing heavily from former Whigs, Democrats still stood as a moderately competitive opponent in the state throughout the 1850s. But unable to instill the same level of political excitement and fear that Republicans were, Democrats struggled to achieve victory in statewide elections. The *Waukesha County Democrat’s* response to the 1860 election, one in which Republicans established complete dominance throughout the North, displays a level of frustration, but without the urgency exhibited in the Republican press. The paper declined to publish the national results, as “there is nothing very pleasant in them for our Democratic readers.” But there was no immediate concern for the Union or for the implications of a Republican-controlled federal government. The paper simply assured its readers that in “four years hence the laugh will be on our side.” Whereas Republican political dialogue portrayed the nation already in dire conflict with itself as early as 1854, Democrats continued to focus on reconciliation until just before the first southern states seceded from the Union.

The triumph of the Republican Party in Wisconsin was not possible solely out of a collective distaste for slavery in the electorate. The failure of earlier antislavery third parties in the state, the Liberty Party, the Free-Soil Party, the People’s Ticket, and Know-Nothings, is a testament to the complicated nature of antislavery politics in the North. Wisconsin’s voters supported an anti-slavery party only after contingent events made them see the spread of slavery as a threat. The Republican Party achieved lasting success, and not one of the other third parties, because a majority of Wisconsin’s voters came to perceive that their way of life was under attack. Slave-owners and corrupt northerners were perverting the republic on both an individual and institutional level. By

---

177 *Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat*, October 4, 1856.
178 *Waukesha County Democrat*, November 6, 1860.
179 *Waukesha County Democrat*, November 6, 1860.
manipulating the federal government through the Fugitive Slave Act and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, as well as exhibiting a lack of private virtue, enemies of free democracy seemed poised to destroy the individual freedom and equality that so many Wisconsinites cherished. In the context of this impending threat, the fact that so many in Wisconsin were willing to support continued legal defiance of the federal government, and elect leaders that explicitly rejected national harmony, is not shocking.
Conclusion

After South Carolina seceded from the Union shortly following Lincoln’s election in 1860, the states’ rights movement in Wisconsin quickly lost momentum. Wisconsin mobilized for war with the South in 1861, a war that would take over 12,000 Wisconsinites’ lives. However, to say that “Wisconsin spoke with a single voice” in regard to the war is not entirely true, argues Richard Current.\(^\text{180}\) States’ rights briefly resurfaced as a political movement during the war in response to the federal government’s troop requisition from the state. By the end of the war Wisconsin had contributed less troops relative to its total white male population than any other Midwestern state.\(^\text{181}\) But the Republican Party maintained its politically dominant position in the state, maintaining control of state politics. As the war’s purpose shifted from one of defense of the Union to one of ending slavery in the nation, Wisconsin’s popularly elected Supreme Court reversed a previous ruling that voided the 1850 referendum on black suffrage. For the first time, the state’s small African American population could vote.

Industrial capitalism in the United States emerged fitfully over the course of the nineteenth century, and was not without its discontents. Much of what fueled the Democratic Party during the Second Party System was uncertainty or outright hostility among voters to the changes that came with the market revolution. Corporations, banks, and wage labor were threats to Democrats that envisioned an agricultural republic of independent land-owners. They worried not only about unearned wealth, or wealth gained without labor, but that the entire democratic system of the United States was in jeopardy if wealth concentrated in the hands of those unproductive laborers.\(^\text{182}\) They envisioned a future United States not of factories and cities, but farmers and towns.\(^\text{183}\)

---


\(^{181}\) 49.7% of Wisconsin’s white males mobilized for the war, less than Indiana (74%), Illinois (69.1), Ohio (68.2), Minnesota (58.3), Iowa (54.7), and Michigan (53.3). Cited in Current, *The History of Wisconsin*, 335.


In some ways the growth of corporations and manufacturing were inevitable outcomes from Alexander Hamilton’s economic policies of the late eighteenth century. From that point on, the United States was on a path towards a liberal, industrial, capitalist economy. Gordon Wood, for example, argues the United States after the Revolution was the “most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world.” What is clear, however, is that the veneration of the capitalist system that seems so inherent in twenty-first century America emerged from an enduring conflict that lasted well into the nineteenth century. Liberalism did not complete its ascent in Wisconsin until mid-century. Until the late 1840s, the Democratic Party, its platform centered on resisting government sponsorship of banks and corporations, ruled Wisconsin. Less than a decade later, the Republican Party had firm control in the state politically. Its pro-railroad, pro-bank, and pro-corporation platform aided in the rapid industrialization of the state. The Republican Party not only ended slavery, but it ensured the endurance of capitalism in America.

Wisconsin’s role in the rise of the Republican Party is important partially because it has received little historical attention. Few major works on the political battles of the 1850s even mention the state, much less devote substantial attention to it. The more populated eastern states, along with flashpoints of conflict like Kansas, are more thoroughly investigated and vigorously debated. Events that eastern actors perpetrated or led influenced more people if for no other reason than simple demographic size. But it should not be taken as fact that how people and the press in New England and New York thought about politics in the 1850s is applicable to the North as a whole. The caning of

---


Charles Sumner, for example, is often cited as a crucial moment in shaping how Americans, both North and South, thought about each other.\textsuperscript{186} In Wisconsin, however, another encounter between public officials, in which Wisconsin representatives Cadwallader C. Washburn and John F. Potter got into a fistfight with southern representatives, had just as much, if not more, influence on perceptions of the South as did the Sumner caning.\textsuperscript{187} The point is that in the decentralized political system of the pre-Civil War United States, lack of attention to regional variation leads to a misinterpretation of the roots of Republican Party support.\textsuperscript{186}

Wisconsin’s political history offers a new way to view political debate, as it served as a laboratory for political movements throughout the North. There was not a Tammany Hall or other entrenched political aristocracy that shaped debates and discourse. There were also not many long-standing political debates that focused the attention of the electorate. In essence, the state was an open market in which political leaders could attempt any political idea or movement. In addition, the demographic composition of the state meant that no one ethnic, religious, or sectional group could dominate. For any party to contend, they had to appeal to a broad cross-section of the population. Therefore, for the historian, Wisconsin is a sort of testing-ground upon which we can see how it is that a political party gained the support of an entire section of the United States. The techniques Wisconsin’s Republican leaders employed were the ones that worked on the broadest cross-section of the northern population, because to achieve success in Wisconsin required appealing to a broad group of people.

This study attempts to understand the rise of the Republican Party through the lens of male voters and the political dialogue they consumed. Yet this is hardly the only way to examine the Republican Party, and with it the acceptance of a liberal market order. Mostly white, English-speaking males wrote the primary sources used to gain the voters’ perspective here. What’s more, newspaper editors were primarily educated


\textsuperscript{187} Current, \textit{The History of Wisconsin}, 269.
migrants from New England. Sherman Booth, editor of the *Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat* and crucial figure in the early Wisconsin Republican Party, was raised in New York and attended Yale. The Yale education was atypical for an editor of one of the major papers cited, but the New England background certainly was not.

The major newspaper published by New England editors formed only a portion of the print culture available in Wisconsin. In 1850, 110,471 of the state’s 304,756 residents were born outside of the United States. Comprising over a third of the state’s population, immigrants established several foreign-language papers such as the German *Volksfreund* and the Norwegian *Emigranten*. Foreign-language presses were partly a means for immigrants to assimilate to American culture. Facing “extreme nativist propaganda,” from some parts of the American-born population, immigrants felt a need to quickly integrate. In the most thorough examination of the immigrant experience in Wisconsin, Kathleen Neils Conzen argues that immigrants formed distinct communities that set newcomers “upon the path to wider interaction with the new society” in which they settled. Newspapers aided immigrants in their attempt to integrate with the larger society by explaining politics, posting job opportunities, and giving immigrants a broader understanding of the culture outside their own.

Assimilation was not the only goal of immigrant presses. During the 1850s, immigrants possessed real political power. Prohibitionists, for example, felt the full weight of the German vote during the 1853 referendum on banning alcohol sales. Frank Byrne argued that the backlash against the measure among Germans played a role in the Republican Party avoiding the temperance all together when it emerged in 1854. Richard Current points out that Republicans continued to court the immigrant vote and

---

189 Seventh Census of the United States: 1850, 925.
combat charges of nativism with their choice for lieutenant governor in 1857, German immigrant Carl Shurz. \textsuperscript{194} Thus historians note where immigrants made their political power felt. But a thorough examination of the foreign-language print culture in Wisconsin is lacking. Excluding the foreign-language press in Wisconsin is akin to excluding a full third of the voting population from the political process.

The foreign-language presses may also help to place Wisconsin politics at mid-century within a transatlantic context. Timothy Roberts explores how revolutions in Europe in 1848 shaped American perceptions of themselves in \textit{Distant Revolutions}. News from Europe “reconstructed, revealed, and fostered a public revolutionary identity that united Americans.” \textsuperscript{195} As Americans perceived that European revolutionary movements failed, they concluded “not only that the American Revolution was exceptional, but also that, indeed, \textit{so was} America at the mid-nineteenth century.” \textsuperscript{196} Mischa Honeck also explores how transatlantic discourse shaped nationalism. Liberal Americans, along with their European counterparts, increasingly associated “freedom, equality, and progress with republican nations while connecting slavery, despotism, and backwardness with aristocracies.” \textsuperscript{197} Because “progress” was such an important feature of their identity, comparisons to people around the world are not uncommon. The \textit{Weekly Wisconsin}, for example, advocated that Americans observe a day of thanksgiving for the blessings that the nation enjoyed. The success of Americans was due in part to “the hands of that mysterious Providence,” but also because “the American People have a name throughout the world, not only of being intelligent and industrious, but above all, \textit{moral}, far beyond [any] other people.” \textsuperscript{198}

Thus even before the 1848 revolutions in Europe prompted Americans to view themselves as exceptional, as Roberts points out, there was a feeling of national superiority. The feelings of superiority did not hinge on economic or military progress, but rather the progress of America’s democratic institutions. In 1846, the \textit{Racine}

\textsuperscript{194} Richard N. Current, \textit{The History of Wisconsin}, 263
\textsuperscript{195} Timothy Mason Roberts, \textit{Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 43.
\textsuperscript{196} Roberts, \textit{Distant Revolutions}, 15.
\textsuperscript{198} \textit{Weekly Wisconsin}, December 1, 1847.
Advocate argued that “the monarchical governments of Europe” looked with dismay at “the great advances of our Republic.” “We had taught the people of the whole world,” argued the editor, “that all could have an equal voice in the affairs of a nation, without danger to public morals or happiness.”¹⁹⁹ A study of the acceptance of capitalism, then, could be expanded to explore how transatlantic self-perceptions influenced people to believe that a liberal market was desirable. This study stresses the importance of how Wisconsinites developed a perception of the free market as natural and moral. But more work remains to identify how those ideas emerged in relation to perceptions of societies outside the United States.²⁰⁰

Another area not explored here is the political role of women in the rise of the Republican Party. During the first half of the nineteenth century, citizenship rights expanded greatly to include nearly all adult white males in the United States. At the same time, the public politics of the revolutionary era, in which politicians sought to gain support of the masses, women included, disappeared. Rosemarie Zagarri argues that “politics out of doors” gave way to party politics, conducted in “more selective gatherings of the party faithful, who were all men.”²⁰¹ In addition to limited political rights, women in the nineteenth century faced an entire legal system designed to deny rights. The “inclusion and privilege” of white males in the legal system, argues Barbara Young Welke, “was defined by and depended upon the exclusion and subordination of others” based on ability, race and gender.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Racine Advocate, April 7, 1846.
Throughout the period examined here, women remained politically, legally, and culturally subordinated throughout the nineteenth century in the United States. Because of this, tracing their role in political change is more challenging than it is for men with codified power. Women’s’ political role could be examined thoroughly with a different set of historical questions than were asked here: How did women interpret the market revolution? Why did women in Wisconsin support the Republican Party? Starting from these historical questions would allow the historian to examine how political power operated outside of official politics, i.e. elections, parties, and law.

As the dominant event in the United States during the nineteenth century, the Civil War will always attract the attention of historians. The Civil War was in many ways a dividing point for the United States. The war marked the end of chattel slavery and the beginning of centralized government power. The nation emerged from the war forever altered, and thus the war’s importance should not be discounted. However, the important historical changes that took place before the war deserve attention. The features of the late nineteenth century United States, the rapid industrialization, the environmental degradation, robber barons, etc., did not emerge naturally. They were products of a particular set of ideologies and economic structures established earlier. Hidden in the debates of the 1850s over slavery and its place in the nation lies the ideological transformation that allowed industrialization to dominate the American experience.
## Appendix

### I. Presidential Vote Shares for Wisconsin, 1848-1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democratic Candidate</th>
<th>Whig Candidate</th>
<th>Free Soil/Republican Candidate</th>
<th>% Democratic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>14,924 (Cass)</td>
<td>13,642 (Taylor)</td>
<td>10,261 (Van Buren, Free Soil)</td>
<td>38.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>33,658 (Pierce)</td>
<td>22,240 (Scott)</td>
<td>8,842 (Hale, Free Soil)</td>
<td>51.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>52,867 (Buchanan)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>66,092 (Fremont)</td>
<td>44.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>65,021 (Douglas)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>86,110 (Lincoln)</td>
<td>43.02%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### II. Vote shares for Governor, 1848-1859

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democratic Candidate</th>
<th>Whig Candidate</th>
<th>Republican Candidate</th>
<th>% Democratic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>19,875 (Dewey)</td>
<td>14,621 (Tweedy)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>58.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>16,649 (Dewey)</td>
<td>11,317 (Collins)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>59.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>21,812 (Upham)</td>
<td>22,319 (Farwell)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>49.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>30,405 (Barstow)</td>
<td>21,886 (Holton)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>58.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>36,355 (Barstow)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>36,198 (Bashford)</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>44,239 (Cross)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>44,693 (Randall)</td>
<td>49.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>59,525 (Hobart)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>63,466 (Randall)</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

203 Compiled from Donoghue, How Wisconsin Voted, 44-45.
204 Compiled from Donoghue, How Wisconsin Voted, 60-63.
### III. Selected Referenda results, 1847-1865

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Votes For</th>
<th>Votes Against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ratification of 1st Constitution</td>
<td>April 1847</td>
<td>14,119</td>
<td>20,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending suffrage to African American males</td>
<td>April 1847</td>
<td>7,664</td>
<td>14,615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratification of 2nd Constitution</td>
<td>March 1848</td>
<td>16,799</td>
<td>6,384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending suffrage to African American males*</td>
<td>November 1849</td>
<td>5,265</td>
<td>4,075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow banking</td>
<td>November 1851</td>
<td>31,289</td>
<td>9,126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending Suffrage to African American males</td>
<td>November 1857</td>
<td>28,235</td>
<td>41,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending Suffrage to African American males</td>
<td>November 1865</td>
<td>46,588</td>
<td>55,591</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Results of referendum not recognized by Wisconsin courts, as minimum voter participation threshold was not reached. In 1866, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that the 1849 referendum on black suffrage was valid and law.

---

205 Compiled from Wisconsin Blue Book, 1940, 225.
IV. From the *Milwaukee Daily American*, 30 August, 1856:

A Melodrama – In One Act.
The Scene is laid in the diningroom of Willard’s Hotel, Washington. Time – 11 A.M.

Scene 1

*Enter the Hon. Mr. Herbert (Representative in Congress) and friend.*

_H._ The table cleared appears, yet have I not of gong nor bell heard sound.
I thought 'twas customary to awake the boarders for the matin meal. Such negligence is inexcusable. Whatboi there, John or James, whate'r thy name. Seek breakfast for myself and friend, instant.

*Waiter (submissively)* – I would, your honor, glad obey, but cannot.

_H._ How! Cannot! Rascal!

_W._ Your honor must obtain an order from the powers that be; the time's so late, I dare not risk the punishment which I might get if in such-disobedience discovered.

_H._ Go! Get then []! Thost vile and miserable rascal, this instant bring me breakfast, warm, for two – or else this instant die! (*Shows pistol.*) Don't know that I my country's representative in Congress am? And dost thou dare refuse me breakfast? Avaunt! Or well I know my passion will o'er power me, And I some deed of horror soon shall do. [*Exit Waiter.*

Scene II.

[Some five or ten minutes supposed to have elapsed magnified by the hungry representative’s impatience into half an hour. During the time the waiter has been endeavoring to obtain the desired meal. Herbert and friend seated at a table, on which are plates, knives, &c.]

_H._ I tell thee that my blood did warm within me, and strong desire I felt to utterly destroy him.

*Enter Keating (the head waiter,)*

_K._ Sir, I am sorry but ---

_H. (Interrupting) ---* Another? Out, villain! Hound! I want thee not around me; Get me my breakfast

_K._ But, sir ---
H. Dost hear me? Dost see this pistol? Now, by mine head, if but three minutes more I have to wait, thy brains shall strew the floor.

K. Without an order from the officer, sir, I dare not, at this hour, accede to your demands. If you will wait ---

H. Now, hireling, hound, take that for they reward! And dare not thus address a Representative again. [Throws chair at Waiter; followed up with coffee urn, plates, knives, forks, &c. Waiter defends himself. Other waiters rush to his assistance. A general melee ensues, in the midst of which Herbert draws his pistol, and shoots Keating through the hear, who, falling dead, is immediately surrounded by his fellow waiters, who sob a mournful dirge over his body.]

[Tableau.]

H. Thus perish all such hireling knaves! My dignity is a thing too sacred to be trifled with, by such as he. Fough! His body taints the air. [{ Herbert, to deliver himself up to the authorities, secured from danger by his public station.]

Scene III.

A court room. Herbert at bar. Justice on bench –

Justice. Were you a common hireling, such as he you slew, Our indignation would know no bounds; But as you are a Representative, and a gentleman withal, And have but died your hands in plebian blood, The court can but regret the deep indignity which forced you to this deed. Had the deceased killed you, 'twould have been murder! But circumstances alter cases, and my respect for your high station, will not allow me to do more than require. That you shall, in ten thousand dollars bail be bound to answer to the charge of manslaughter. [Two friends of H. enter into bonds for him, and he retires, amid loud shouts from his friends, while the justices make a polite bow.]

Enter the Goddess of liberty, who has been an observer of the affair.

Goddess of Liberty – And this is modern justice! this a gentleman, forsooth! Alas! That delegated justice should thus become the screen for murder. And so the servant is where it should be the master. Alas! that this, my best-beloved child, America, should so disgrace its birth. May the time quickly come, when ruffians, Though high in office they may be, intrusted with the cares of nations, even, shall be but ruffians still and as such treated.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Newspapers:

Madison Weekly Argus

Milwaukee Courier

Milwaukee Daily American

Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat

Milwaukee Daily News

Racine Advocate

Racine Democrat

Waukesha County Democrat

Weekly Wisconsin

Wisconsin Free Democrat

Primary Source Collections:


Other Primary Sources:

Annual Statements and Reports. Milwaukee Chamber of Commerce.

Census of Wisconsin, 1836-1880.

Seventh Census of the United States, 1850.
Secondary Sources


Hantke, Richard W. “Elisha W. Keyes, the Bismarck of Western Politics.” in *WMH* 31 (September, 1947). 29-41.

-- “Elisha W. Keyes and the Radical Republicans,” in *WMH* 35 (Spring, 1952), 203-208.


Soltow, Lee. Patterns of Wealthholding in Wisconsin since 1850 (Madison, 1971).


---


